NEW
NICK CARTER
WEEKLY

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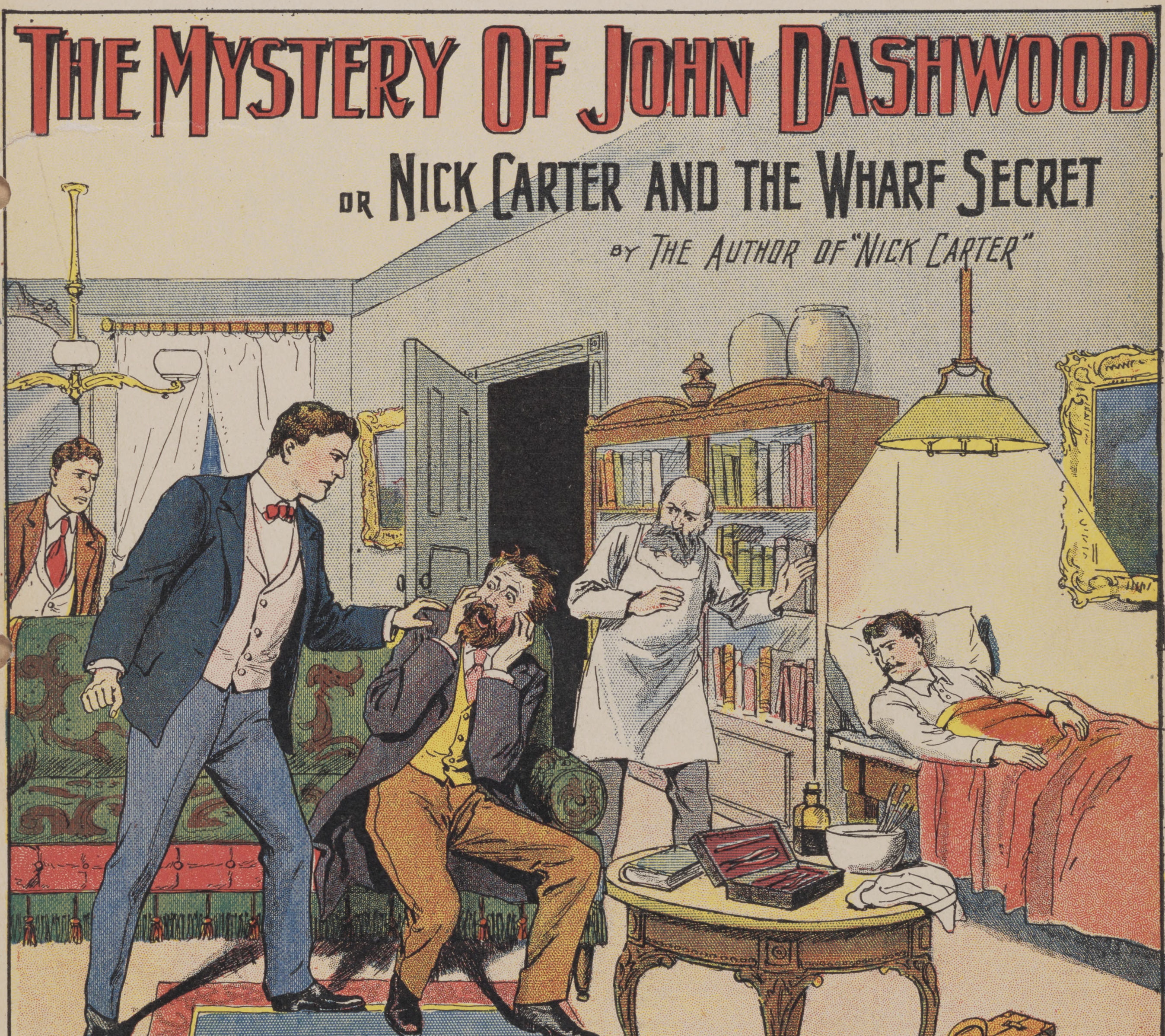
No. 436. **Price, Five Cents.**

THE MYSTERY OF JOHN DASHWOOD

OR NICK CARTER AND THE WHARF SECRET

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



Nick Carter, placing his hand on the man's shoulder, exclaimed: "I arrest you for the murder of Lucia Massona."

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THE MYSTERY OF JOHN DASHWOOD;

OR,

Nick Carter and the Wharf Secret.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A MAN WITHOUT A SECRET.

On the shady veranda of an old-fashioned Southern house, on the outskirts of St. Louis, two men in the prime of life were enjoying their cigars one fine morning in the year of the great exposition.

One, the younger, with a fair, full face and honest, gray eyes, after a long period of silence, said:

"To-morrow will decide her fate, Nick. You have worked up a strong case against her, but I am afraid of the jury."

"The jury is all right. We have seen to that, John. Conviction is certain. It has been an easy case for me."

The woman to whose trial reference had been made had killed her husband, but the deed had not been witnessed, and it was due to Nick Carter's efforts that a complete case for the prosecution had been made out.

"Murder is a secret of such awful weight," said Nick, "that there are few men, to say nothing of women, who are able successfully to carry it."

"It will out sometime or other, eh?"

"In the majority of cases, yes. Of course there are instances where the crime of taking human life has remained an unsolved and seemingly insoluble mystery, but such instances have, in my opinion, resulted either through a chain of accidents, impossible to foresee, or through the negligence or inefficiency of the officers of the law, whose duty it was to use all possible skill and diligence in arriving at the facts. In this woman's case we have, I think, exercised all necessary skill and diligence. To-morrow the end will come, and the next day I shall be on my way to New York."

"You have been here but a week, Nick, and yet I feel as if I had known you a lifetime. When you introduced yourself as an old friend of my mother, I knew in a moment that I had myself found a friend, and one after my own heart."

The young fellow's earnestness and feeling warmed the cockles of the great detective's heart. He liked John Dashwood and he took no pains to conceal the fact.

A portly, well-groomed man of sixty, with a self-satisfied smile on his keen, smoothly shaven face, who had come out of the house and approached unperceived, now broke in with the remark:

"I'll bet it's a secret your are discussing."

"What makes you think so?" asked John Dashwood, quickly.

"The expression of your face. There is certainly something about the position of your lips, your eyes are slightly narrowed, your head is bowed in a suspicious manner, your——"

"Might we not have been exchanging simple confidences?" put in Nick, with a smile.

"Possibly. But confidences are secrets, you know."

The speaker leaned against the railing in front of the two friends and regarded them benignly.

"We were not discussing secrets," said Dashwood, as he threw back his head, though his manner was pleasant enough.

"No? Then you should have been, for all of us have our secrets."

"Dashwood shook his head. "You must except me, Mr. Leonard," he said.

"What? A man without a secret? Come, now, Dashwood, you must be joking. I don't assume, of course, that any secret you may have hidden in your breast is of a shady nature, but to say that your mind is an open book, that during your twenty-six years of life—twenty-six or twenty-seven, which is it?"

"Twenty-six."

"That during your twenty-six years of life you have never had any experience which, for honorable reasons, you have thought best to keep to yourself, or have ever been the recipient of another's secret, equally honorable, but not proper for publication, is to stamp you as an exceptional man."

Dashwood laughed.

"I am an exceptional man, then, for really I haven't any secrets. But as for Mr. Carter, here," turning and nodding in his friend's direction, "he is nothing less than a walking mystery. He has to be, you know, for he is a detective."

Mr. Leonard looked keenly at Nick Carter.

"How is it?" he asked, in a bantering tone. "Are you as Dashwood says, or is he mistaken, and are you to be placed with him in the category of unfledged innocents? Come now, out with the truth. Are you a man with a corroding secret, or are you not?"

"There are some matters of no concern to the general public," replied Nick, rather coldly, "which I have found advisable to keep to myself. But," with a smile, "they are honest ones, I assure you."

"Would your enemies think so if they knew them?" queried Leonard, provokingly.

"My enemies give me little concern."

"Neither do mine, for I have none," said John Dashwood, proudly.

Gabriel Leonard lifted his eyebrows. Then he spoke rather cynically. "You are both to be congratulated. Dashwood, especially. A man without a secret and with not an enemy in the world! Your condition, I suppose, must be attributed to the very lucky circumstances that have hitherto surrounded your existence."

Dashwood nodded. "I have been lucky, I know, and the greatest piece of luck that ever came in my way, Mr. Leonard, was when I made your daughter my wife."

As he spoke, pride and satisfaction, strong and deep, were expressed in his honest countenance.

"Letty ought to have heard that pretty speech," said Leonard, lightly, though in his heart he was vastly pleased with his son-in-law's appreciation of the treasure he had won.

Nick accompanied his friend uptown that morning and left him at a large building on Market Street, a few blocks from the Union Depot, with the understanding that they should dine together in the afternoon.

John Dashwood was the manager of a manufacturing company of which Gabriel Leonard was the president. His parents were dead and he lived with his father-in-law, who was a widower.

The friends took dinner in an Olive Street restaurant. Dashwood's brow was clouded throughout the meal.

"What's the matter, John?" Nick asked. "Anything wrong in the office?"

"I hope not; but a good bit of money has come in lately and the books do not show what they ought to show."

"Did you find any pronounced irregularities?"

"I have found something that excites my suspicions, but I can't make sure that there has been crooked work until I have gone over the books thoroughly and compared vouchers, and so forth. I shall work at them tonight, for I know I shan't sleep a wink until I have matters straightened out. It's lucky Letty is away on a visit to Chicago, or she would be terribly worried over the muddle."

Nick looked grave.

"John," he said, earnestly, "there may be more in this than you have any idea of. What do you say? May I come round to-night and give you the benefit of my experience?"

"Yes. I shall be glad to have you. Come at, say, nine o'clock."

"All right."

It was six o'clock when they parted. At nine Nick went up the elevator to the floor upon which was located the office of the manufacturing company. He knocked at the door, but there was no answer. He waited a moment and knocked again. Still no answer. By means of the keyhole he saw that there was no light in the office. Dashwood, then, was not there. Something must have happened, something out of the ordinary, to cause this punctiliously honorable young man to slight an appointment with a friend. The detective instantly attributed Dashwood's absence to an alarming discovery made while examining the books and accounts of the firm. Perhaps he had gone home. In a saloon below, next door to the entrance, was a phone. Nick used it to call up Gabriel Leonard's residence. The housekeeper answered. Neither Mr. Dashwood nor Mr. Leonard was at home. Didn't know where either might be found. Had Mr. Carter gone out to the fair grounds? They might be enjoying the sights of the Pike.

Nick left the phone troubled in mind. Leonard's absence from home was indication that business of pressing importance had demanded his attention, for his rule, so the detective had been informed by Dashwood, was to remain at home every evening. He cared nothing for theaters or social divertisements, belonged to no club or secret order. The business of each day over, he betook himself to his suburban residence, there to find comfort and rest in his pipe and newspapers.

Nick went up to the counter and engaged in conversation with the barkeeper.

"How's business this evening?"

"Rotten. Everybody is at the fair."

"Gives you opportunity to get a breath of fresh air as compensation, though."

"Yes, that's so. I stood at the door from eight until eight-forty-five without a break."

"Studying the people who passed?"

"In a way."

"All sorts and conditions in town during the fair. Good chance for a novelist to make copy."

"That's right. Now, I saw something to-night that might give one of these fiction fellows a cue. A fact here and there is all they want. Imagination does the rest."

"What did you see, if it is a fair question?"

"I saw a woman act in two scenes."

"Monologue?"

"No, she had company, but she was the star. Great woman that. I know her name, but I've never spoken to her. Wish I did know her. I'd ask her what her little play to-night might mean."

"Say," said Nick, with an eagerness that was not assumed, but which was purposely allowed vent, "you are exciting my curiosity. What was her play? But first let's smoke, unless you prefer liquid refreshment."

"No, a cigar suits me."

After each man had lighted his weed, the barkeeper began his story:

"I had been at the door not more than five minutes when my lady comes up and starts for the elevator. Her lips were shut tight, and she looked as if she had it in for some one and was going to call for a settlement. She was gone about three minutes, and then reappeared, in company with Luke Filbon, the bookkeeper and cashier of the manufacturing company. Filbon, who is a young geezer with not enough sense to last him overnight, appeared to be dippy with fright. They did not see me, for I was standing off the sidewalk, and so I got the full benefit of the scene without putting up a bean. The way that woman's tongue lashed young Filbon was a caution to sinners. 'You shouldn't have waited so long,' she said. 'You should have taken it out when you left the office this afternoon. You are a poor, weak, pitiful fool. I want nothing more to do with you. If I had not more spunk than you have I'd cut my throat. Go. You've ruined everything. You have destroyed my chance, and you have destroyed your own. You're fit for nothing but to wear stripes. Get out of my sight.'

"'I'll go home, get my revolver and blow out my brains, that's what I'll do,' Filbon said. 'I thought you loved me, but it was the money you wanted, not me.'

"'I wanted both, you fool,' she retorted. 'But go. I don't care to talk further with you. I have no use for such timid cattle.'

"'You will be sorry when you read the papers to-morrow morning,' he said, and then away he went, leaving her standing on the sidewalk just outside the entrance to the elevator. For a few minutes she stood there. Then I heard her say: 'It's risky, but it has got to be done, for that old fool may, after all, fail to come to time.' Bad habit that, talking to one's self, but I reckon she was so worked up that she didn't realize what she was saying. I don't know, of course, what she had made up her mind to do, and maybe she had no chance to carry it out, for just at that moment the elevator descended—it seems the cage was at one of the upper floors all this time—and John Dashwood came out. The woman spoke to him first. I heard her plainly. 'You had better look after Luke Filbon,' she said, 'for he's liable to make a fool of himself to-night.'

"'Where is he?' Dashwood asked, sharply.

"'Gone home,' she said.

"Dashwood thanked her, and then went down the street aways and took a car, the car that goes to Broadway. The woman watched him get on the car, and then hurried around the corner."

The barkeeper paused.

"Is that all?" Nick asked.

"Not quite. Ten minutes passed, and a Laclede Avenue car stops at the corner and off gets Gabriel Leonard. He comes to the elevator entrance and goes up in the cage. Five minutes goes by, and down he comes, muttering something about there being the devil to pay. Off he goes on a car bound for Broadway. Gone to see Filbon."

"What makes you think so?"

"I am a deducer," answered the barkeeper, with a knowing air. "Luke Filbon lives on one of the little streets west of Broadway, near the southern limits of the city. The Broadway car lands within a couple of blocks of his home. That's where Dashwood went to-night, and it's ten to one that Leonard followed him."

There was a city directory in the saloon, and when Nick had found Filbon's address, he said, quickly: "Your story has interested me. I think I will go out there myself. I know both Dashwood and Leonard, and I am curious to learn what is at the bottom of to-night's business. Now, as to the woman. You said you know her name. What is it?"

"Madam Ree. She is a palmist, who has recently opened a joint on Chestnut Street."

Madam Ree! Nick drew a deep breath. Madam Ree was the assumed name of Cora Reesey, who, as the accomplice of James Dorrant, had figured so conspicuously in a San Francisco case which several months before had occupied the attention and had exhibited the wonderful skill of the great detective.*

This woman, handsome, fascinating, unscrupulous, with wits sharpened by the contest with Nick Carter, whose bitter enemy she had announced herself to be, because she had been thwarted in her attempt to win a fortune in diamonds, was now in St. Louis and mixed up in a mysterious affair in which Nick's friend, John Dashwood, was in some way connected. What did it all mean?

CHAPTER II.

THE FATE OF THE TRANSGRESSOR.

At the time of Nick Carter's meeting with Cora Reesey she was but a novice in crime, but the detective was convinced by a study of her character that she needed only experience to make her a dangerous foe. Foiled in her scheme to enrich herself at the expense of Roland Garrett, a fortunate member of San Francisco's society, she had turned upon Nick Carter, the author of her defeat, and had venomously announced her intention to get even. Perhaps it had been her plan to try conclusions with the great detective in the city of New York, his headquarters, and perhaps the stay in St. Louis was meant to be but temporary and for the purpose of putting her in funds.

After arranging a disguise which completely concealed his identity, Nick boarded a car bound for Broadway, transferred to that long thoroughfare which runs parallel with and through the river district, and near the hour of eleven found himself in front of the door of Luke Filbon's house. It was a small, one-story, brick structure, located but a short distance from the river and near a large grain elevator. The house was in darkness, and all was silent within. Nick pressed the button by the side of the door, and soon was heard a weak, querulous voice from within.

"Who's there?"

"Some one to see Mr. Filbon on important business. Is he at home?"

"No, and he won't come to-night, I'm thinking. He said he had work to do at the office that would likely keep him until after midnight. I am his mother. I suppose you know."

"I took it for granted that you were. Has anyone been here to see him this evening?"

"Yes. John Dashwood was here about an hour ago."

"No one else?"

"No. What's the matter? Luke isn't in any trouble, is he?"

There was maternal anxiety in the tone of the voice. Nick believed that evasion would be charity.

"I hope not," he said. "Good-night," and he walked quickly away from the door before further and probably embarrassing questions could be asked.

The patrolman on the beat was found. He had seen two men go from Broadway toward the Filbon house between nine and ten o'clock. They were not together, but were fifteen minutes apart. He had not been near enough to observe them closely, but was satisfied from their build—they were both large men—that neither was Filbon, who was small and thin.

Perplexed and dissatisfied, the detective went to the river end of the street. There was a rotten wharf extending toward the big grain elevator. It was short, and for a portion of its length the planking had been torn out.

The night was clear, with a half moon, and Nick picked his way about the wharf, in the hope that he might find a clew to the night's mysterious proceedings. There was a possibility that Luke Filbon, determined on suicide, had given up the idea of going home to secure the revolver—to take which action he would have to tell a story that would deceive his mother, and that would be no easy task—and instead had thrown himself into the Mississippi.

Nick, with his bull's-eye, investigated the water space under the wharf without much hope of making a discovery. If death by drowning had been Filbon's purpose, he would, in all probability, have jumped from the edge of the wharf into the river, and the swift current would have carried him far downstream.

The water, muddy and but slightly disturbed, carried nothing upon its surface that was out of the ordinary. Nick moved to a point where he could get an outlook on the short section of bank beyond the water. He was rewarded by the sight of a human figure huddled up on the sloping bank of the levee a few feet from the water's edge. The figure was that of a man, with head bowed, elbows on knees and face in hands. As the light of the bull's-eye was flashed upon him the man lifted his head with a start, but made no effort to arise. Nick believed that a way to get under the wharf would be found at the street abutment. Hastening over the planks, he soon discovered an opening, and quickly descended. The man was still there. He had not moved. Walking over to him, the detective saw a small, thin man of about twenty-five, with a haggard face and bloodshot eyes.

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*See "Nick Carter's Convict Enemy; or, The Power That Makes Men Tremble," No. 432.

"What do you want?" he asked, in a surly tone. "I am minding my own business here."

"I want your confidence," said Nick, kindly. "I am not your enemy. I may prove to be the best friend you ever had."

The young man gazed stupidly at the detective, then lowered his head and said, in a voice broken with emotion: "No; I have no friends."

"That remains to be seen, Mr. Luke Filbon."

"My God! Do you know me?"

There was the ring of abject despair in the utterance.

"Yes, I know you now, if I did not know you before."

For a few moments there was silence. Then Nick asked: "What do you fear?"

"If I ever see daylight, I fear the anger and vengeance of one man."

"Gabriel Leonard?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"By putting two and two together."

"Who are you?"

There was both fear and curiosity in the expression of Filbon's face.

"I am friend of John Dashwood, and he is one man among a thousand. That ought to satisfy you."

Filbon groaned.

"Yes, yes," he huskily replied. "I can guess who you are. You are Nick Carter, and that means——"

"It means," was the detective's quick interruption, "that you must tell the truth and that you need not fear me. I have talked with your mother, and I pity her son. Come, confide in me, for I believe you have been hounded into your present position."

"I—I can't tell you."

Great drops of perspiration showed themselves on Filbon's brow. Nick lighted a cigar.

"Let me help you a little," he said, easily. "You have been led into crime by a woman, and you are afraid that if you betray her your life will be attempted. Am I right?"

"You are not far wrong," said the young man, wearily.

"Now, if you can aid me in tightening the cords about this woman, will not that furnish protection for yourself? For how can you be harmed if the person you fear is in prison?"

Filbon shook his head, and then compressed his lips. He was now sorry that he had admitted anything, and he cursed his want of backbone. And he thought, bitterly: "If I hadn't been a mean, spiritless wretch, I would never have got into this mess."

Nick knew the nature he had to deal with. He said, quietly: "Listen to me a moment, and maybe you will find it advisable to change your mind. You are the bookkeeper and cashier of the manufacturing company of which Gabriel Leonard is president and John Dashwood is manager. You have been stealing from the company. The crime would never have been committed but for the evil prompting of a wicked woman, who, protesting love for you, would have cast you aside the moment she received the money she urged you to steal. To-night John Dashwood surprised your guilty secret. You had hidden the stolen money in the office, and you went there to get it, in pursuance of this woman's order. You did not get it, or, if you did, it was taken from you. Dashwood allowed you to go. His heart overflows with charity and—and I presume he knows your mother. As you left the elevator you saw the woman. You told her that the scheme had failed. She reproached you, cast you off. You then announced your intention to go home, get a revolver and blow out your brains. What induced you to reconsider that determination?"

Luke Filbon had listened to this clear exposition of his case in sheer amazement. "No need to keep silent longer," he said, in a husky voice. "I'll tell you all."

But he did not at once begin his story.

For some time he sat without speaking, his eyes on the water. What thoughts passed through his mind the detective never guessed until his account with Filbon had been closed.

"This woman," he began, in a steady voice, "came to St. Louis a short time ago. I met her on the evening following her arrival here. It was at a Parisian beauty show, which has since been interdicted by the police. She was the star of the outfit, and my admiration seemed to please her. We had opportunity for a quiet confab, and she invited me to call upon her next day. I was fool enough to do so, and before I had been with her an hour she knew all about my affairs. I have never associated much with women of her class, and she exercised her powers of fascination so well that the next visit I promised to do all she wished me to do. I was infatuated, and when she painted in glowing colors a life abroad without work, a life that should be one long round of pleasure, I stood ready to furnish the means if such a thing were possible. She said we would require twenty thousand dollars and proposed that I should steal that amount from the company. I could not see my way to the performance of such a thing. I told her that, though I was the cashier, there was never more than a few thousands in the safe on any one day, and that every afternoon, before the banks closed, the money in the safe was banked.

"She had thought of that, she said, and could suggest a way out of the difficulty. I could every day hold out something, say a few hundred dollars as a rule, and more when the receipts should be unusually large, and cover up the shortage by falsifying the books. In this way the twenty thousand dollars could be withdrawn within thirty days. The plan seemed feasible, for I was fully trusted by Dashwood, and before the expiration of thirty days I had drawn out of the safe and secreted in the office twenty thousand dollars in bank notes."

"Of course, you did not take the numbers?"

"But I did. There was no reason for it. Force of habit, I suppose, made me put them down."

"Did you keep the list?"

"Yes, and I have it with me. But it is of no importance, as you must see before I have finished my story. Yesterday afternoon I saw Madam Ree—that's her name, and she took up the palmist business when the beauty show shut up shop—and told her the twenty thousand would be ready to-night. Her eyes sparkled with pleasure, and she was never more gracious. All the details of our contemplated trip to Europe were gone over, and when I left her she promised to meet me across the street from the office at seven-thirty o'clock to-night.

"At seven-fifteen I went to the office, and was surprised to see John Dashwood there, and at work on the books. This was suspicious, and I was all of a tremble lest he should discover one or more of my false entries. His first words told me that the game was up.

"'Sit down,' he said, sternly. 'I shall have something to say to you before long.'

"I waited in an agony of dread for nearly half an hour. Then Dashwood turned and faced me. 'You have been taking the firm's money, Filbon,' he said, sorrowfully. 'Why have you done so? And what has become of it?' I was so taken aback, so overwhelmed by the gravity of my position, that I could only stammer a few inarticulate words.

"'Come,' he said, 'where is the money?'

"In an instant my brain cleared up.

"I knew what I must do.

"I would give him the money, then go home, get my pistol and blow out my brains. Taking the notes from their hiding place, I handed them to Dashwood, without a word.

"'Very well,' he said, kindly. 'Now, go home, get a good sleep and come around in the morning and we'll talk over this matter.'

"So saying, he turned his back to me, opened the safe, put the notes in a box and then relocked the safe. Before he looked up again I was gone. Downstairs I met Madam Ree. She had become impatient over my delay, and was beside herself with rage. When I told her what had happened she lost all control of herself. While she upbraided me, the scales fell from my eyes. I saw that I had been tricked, that the woman cared nothing for me, had been using me as a tool to enrich herself. I left her resolved to end my life. I went down the street, intending to take the first car for Broadway that came along. But the thought of showing my telltale face to any of the passengers so distressed me that I gave up the idea of riding and determined to walk the distance. I went down to Washington Street and from Washington Street to Seventh, and so on out to my home. But I did not enter the house. I knew I could not meet my mother's eye"—here great sobs shook his frame—"I knew I could not invent a story that would be likely to allay her suspicions. No, if I wished to die, I must try some other way. I came down here to think over the matter. That's all."

"Did you see anyone on the wharf or in its vicinity as you came down?"

"No."

"How long have you been here?"

"I had been here about half an hour before you came."

Nick regarded the young man thoughtfully. "You have made a serious mistake," he said, slowly, but not unkindly, "but there's hope for you. Your nature is not a vicious one. I can't give you positive assurance, but my opinion is that you will not be prosecuted for what you have done."

"You don't know Gabriel Leonard," was the reply, given in a hopeless tone. "He is hard, hard as nails. I know him. And there is my mother. Even if I escape prosecution, I must lose my place. She will discover the truth. I could not lie to her."

"You should have thought of your mother before," said the detective, coldly.

"I know it, I know it, and I'm lost, lost! Go away! Leave me to myself for a minute. Let me consider. Oh, my poor brain!"

The spectacle of Filbon's anguish was not a pleasant one, and Nick moved a few paces away. But he kept his eyes on Filbon, who, rocking his body and sobbing violently, seemed to be in the lowest depths of despair. Suddenly, with a wild laugh, he straightened up. "I have settled it," he almost shouted. "It's all right now."

Nick rushed forward, seized him by the arm, and let the lantern's light fall full upon his face. What he saw filled him with dismay.

"What have you done?" he demanded, harshly.

"Got the stuff at a drug store coming down here," was the answer, given with chattering teeth. "Fooled you, didn't I? Ha, ha!"—the laugh quickly ceased, the face grew ashen, the form stiffened, there was a sharp rattle in the throat, and Nick, dropping his bull's-eye, caught the body as it was falling forward. Luke Filbon, weak instrument of a woman's wicked cupidity, was dead.

A small phial on the ground by the side of the body told the story of the fatal agency. It had contained prussic acid, one of the deadliest and quickest-acting poisons known to the pharmacopia. It had been procured that evening at a Broadway drug store, for the label was there, and there were the death's head and crossbones below the word "Poison." By what representations had he obtained the poison? A visit to the drug store would furnish the explanation.

The detective was about to leave the spot, when a sudden thought caused him to stay his steps. In Filbon's pocket was the list of bank notes which he had stolen and replaced. The peculiar happenings of the night contained mysterious suggestions. The list, apparently without value, might become useful. No harm in obtaining possession of it. It was found and placed in Nick's pocketbook. Now the detective hurried away to find a patrolman, state what had been discovered, and have the nearest police station notified.

When this duty had been performed, Nick went to the drug store where the prussic acid had been purchased. He had left the phial where he had found it, for it bore evidence that would, at the coroner's inquest, in connection with an analysis of the contents of the dead man's stomach, absolutely determine the cause of death.

It was an all-night drug store, and the one clerk readily gave the information desired. He had known Filbon as a customer for many years, and the poison had been sold upon the representation that it was to be used for the asthma, with which Filbon's mother was afflicted. "Diluted with water, it is often used by asthmatics," said the clerk, "as it gives quick relief." When informed that the poison had been used for quite a different purpose, the clerk was horrified.

Nick Carter could do no more that night. He sought his room in Jefferson Avenue, but was an early riser. At nine o'clock next morning he called at the office of the manufacturing company. It was closed. He went away, returning at ten o'clock. In response to his knock, the door was opened by Gabriel Leonard. His face was pale, and there were dark circles about his eyes. He did not greet the detective with his usual heartiness.

"Where is Dashwood?" was Nick's first question.

"I don't know," was the answer, in a half-angry manner.

"Didn't Dashwood go home last night?"

"No. I haven't seen him since early yesterday afternoon."

Leonard passed a trembling hand over his forehead, met Nick's frowning gaze for an instant, and then his eyes sought the floor.

CHAPTER III.

MYSTERY WITHIN MYSTERY.

Nick Carter, while a visitor at the house of Gabriel Leonard, had a fair opportunity for studying the man. The result did not leave a favorable impression. Leonard's cynicism, his occasional exhibition of a plastic conscience, his at times brutal way of putting things, repelled friendship. Still he might be like many business men engaged in large enterprises, case-hardened in respect of the nicer notions of morality, and yet possessed of no really vicious instincts. But Nick, in looking at Leonard now, was not certain whether his former deductions had not been too favorable. The manufacturer was uneasy in mind, had shifted his gaze as if he were afraid to look an honest man squarely in the face. What did this strange absence of John Dashwood mean? And had Leonard any connection with it?

Nick closed the door, and deliberately took a seat. Leonard, still at ease, paced the floor.

"I suppose you made an unfortunate discovery last night," said Nick, tentatively.

"I"—giving the detective one sharp glance and then letting his eyes fall again—"I made a discovery, certainly. But how did you learn of it?"

"From Luke Filbon, whose death, by suicide, is the feature of the local news in this morning's papers."

"You saw him before he died?" asked Leonard, eagerly.

"Yes."

"Then perhaps he told you where he had secreted the stolen money?"

The detective stared at the manufacturer.

"Am I to infer," he said, rather sharply, "that you did not find the money in the safe, where it had been placed by John Dashwood?"

"The money was not in the safe," said Leonard.

Tone and manner indicated that he was speaking the truth.

This was an astonishing statement. A terrible suspicion entered the mind of the detective. "No money in the safe," he said, looking fixedly at the manufacturer, who had pulled himself together and had his head raised almost defiantly, "and how do you account for its absence?"

"Ask me something easy."

"Was the safe locked when you came in this morning?"

"Yes."

"And was the safe locked when you visited the office last night?"

Leonard started violently.

"How do you know I was here last night?" he asked, in a voice which shook slightly, in spite of his efforts at control.

"I know, and that's enough. As you were here, in your own office, as you had a right to be, why should you try to conceal that fact?"

“I haven't been trying to conceal it.” His manner was now offensive. “I would ask you to moderate your tone a little. What right have you to pry into my personal affairs? I admit your friendship for John Dashwood, but it must not carry you to the length of insulting me.”

Nick smiled inwardly. He was succeeding in drawing Leonard out. When the manufacturer's period of agitation should have passed, when affairs in some measure should have settled into a normal condition and he should again become the cool, self-contained man of business, the effort to obtain information might prove difficult.

“I spoke as a detective,” replied Nick, smoothly, “and with no intention of insulting you. This is a grave matter. Luke Filbon is dead. John Dashwood has disappeared. I shall not leave St. Louis until the mystery of last night's work has been cleared up. I expect to have your assistance. Of course you will give it?”

“Of course, of course,” returned Leonard, in a mollified tone, though his uneasiness had not disappeared.

“Then please answer such questions as I shall put to you. To begin, did you open the safe when you were here last night?”

“No, I did not,” said Leonard, quickly and positively.

“But, of course, you discovered that the money—twenty thousand dollars—had been stolen?”

“Not the amount—I did not know the amount—the books were open on the desk—some entries were marked—and a few minutes' inspection showed me that I had been robbed.”

“What did you do when you made the discovery, Mr. Leonard?” asked Nick, quietly.

“I started for Filbon's house.”

“Did you go there?”

“No. I passed the house, saw no light, and, having in mind the nervous condition of Mrs. Filbon—she is old and frail—I determined to let the matter go over until to-day.”

“Did you return home by car?”

“No. I was excited over the discovery, and I wanted to quiet my nerves. I walked home.”

“It was a long walk for you.”

“It was.”

“Your place is near Forest Park, southwest of the Filbon place. Why did you go east, toward the river, instead of west, toward the King's Highway, which would have taken you near your home?”

“What do you mean?” Leonard's surprise was genuine.

But was not fear mingled with the surprise. Nick's penetrating gaze tried to answer the question.

“I have been informed that a man of your build passed Filbon's house last night going not toward Broadway, but away from it.”

Such had been the account given by the patrolman.

Leonard appeared relieved by the statement. “The man may have resembled me in build,” he said. “Probably there are thousands in this city who do, but, all the same, I was not the man.”

“How do you account for Dashwood's absence?” said Nick, after a pause.

Leonard did not answer for a moment. He stroked his chin and frowned. When he spoke it was with a curious hesitancy.

“I hate to say it,” he said, with a furtive glance at the detective's face, “but I can account for it only in one way. Dashwood has taken the money and made off with it.”

“It's not so,” said Nick, with a warmth that caused Leonard's cheeks to flush. “He is no thief. You—you cannot mean this, Mr. Leonard.”

“Better men than he have fallen from grace,” was the dogged response. “He might have been speculating and——”

“Not another word,” interrupted Nick. “I won't hear it.”

Leonard shrugged his heavy shoulders.

“Friendship is a fine thing,” he said, with a half snee
“It knows no medium. It's all or nothing. Well,” with patronizing smile that made Nick grit his teeth, “I can't blame you for sticking up for John. He is a fine fellow, a very fine fellow, and if he has taken a wrong step I shall be deeply grieved.”

A police officer entered before another word could be said. He had a summons for Leonard to appear at the coroner's inquest in the matter of Luke Filbon's death.

“One o'clock,” said the manufacturer, glancing at the paper. “I will have time to go home and get an early lunch. I will see you again, Mr. Carter.”

Nick took the suggestion that he should leave, but once on the sidewalk he hastened to the nearest telegraph station and wired Chick, his brave and shrewd assistant, to come at once. This done, the detective went to the apartments of Madam Ree, on Chestnut Street. The sign ha been taken down and the rooms were closed. From th janitress Nick learned that Madam Ree had left St. Louis, giving no hint as to her destination.

“When did she leave?”

“Last night. She gave up her rooms about eight o'clock.”

“Who hauled her luggage? Do you know?”

“She didn't have any luggage?”

“What? Didn't she sleep in this building?”

“No.”

“Where did she lodge?”

“I don't know.”

“While she was here did she have many visitors?”

“No. Business was poor. That's why she gave it up, I guess.”

“Do you know Gabriel Leonard, the manufacturer?”

“Can't say as I do. I have not been in the city but a few months.”

Nick described Leonard, and asked if such a man had ever visited Madam Ree.

The janitress' face brightened.

"Yes. A man of that look and build was here several times."

"Did Madam Ree ever speak to you about him?"

"Yes. I was going by her reception room the other day, when he came out. His face was as long as the moral law. As he went down the stairs, Madam Ree turned to me and winked. 'That's an old fool,' she said, contemptuously, 'and I've got him on a string. He's going to make me rich.' I tried to pump her, but she wouldn't say anything more."

"What did she say when she left yesterday?"

"Not very much. She said she was tired of St. Louis and that she was about to leave it for good. The next morning would see her on the way to another city."

"Was she in good spirits?"

"Indeed she was. She was as happy as a lark."

The janitress permitted Nick to see the rooms which Madam Ree had vacated, but there was nothing to denote that she had ever occupied them.

In a brown study, Nick left the place and walked from Chestnut Street to Market. Presently his eye brightened and his lips tightened. Ideas, at first confused, were taking definite shape. There was a riddle to solve, and his acute brain had evolved what might prove to be a start toward the solution. With a determined mien, he ascended the elevator of the factory building and was soon before the door of the office. The corridor was clear, there was no one about. With his picklock he opened the door, passed in, shut the door and then proceeded to take a close survey of the office. Between the two front windows was a large roller-top desk. Against one of the narrow sides of the room was the safe. Opposite, against the other narrow side, was a small desk, used by Dashwood. By the side of the safe was a door opening into the president's private apartment. It was partly open, and Nick went in. Nothing there except a desk, a closet and a few chairs. After a thorough inspection, the detective returned to the main office. Here the clean floor and the absence of dust denoted that the janitor had performed his usual work that morning. There was a waste basket for each desk. The one by the small desk was empty; the other, by the large desk, contained a few torn scraps of paper. Nick took them up one by one, saw that they were all from envelopes and printed circulars and catch penny advertisements, and threw them back into the basket.

The great detective now took a position near the door and fronting the large desk, and tried to put himself in the place of Gabriel Leonard, at the time of her visit to the office the night before, a visit which had resulted in the discovery of Filbon's dishonesty.

"He came up for an important purpose," ran the detective's thought, "for he sticks so close at home evenings that nothing short of important business could have called him out. Was it a suspicion of Filbon's crookedness? Or was it a purely personal matter having no relation to the books of the company? Impossible, at this moment, to say, unless—unless the remarks of Madam Ree, overheard by the saloon man downstairs, had reference to Gabriel Leonard. She said: 'It's risky, but it has got to be done, for that old fool may after all fail to come.'

"She then started for the elevator to do that which she had declared had got to be done.

"What was that?

"Evidently to assault, perhaps kill John Dashwood and secure the twenty thousand dollars, which he had forced Luke Filbon to give up. The sudden appearance of Dashwood, coming down the elevator, prevented the carrying out of this murderous scheme. Dashwood took a car; she did not do so. Where she went, what she did, are matters which may be considered later on. What is requisite now to know is: Are she and Leonard the possessors of some secret; is Leonard in her power and did she mean Leonard when she said 'the old fool may after all fail to come to time'?

"The story told by the janitress shows that she and Leonard are acquainted, and it shows also that she has some hold on the manufacturer. Her words spoken to the janitress imply as much, the demeanor of Leonard, when he left her room a few days ago, supports the implication. Therefore, in attempting to probe the mystery of last night's doings, I must consider Madam Ree. She is mixed up in this strange affair, as well as Gabriel Leonard and John Dashwood, but as she has probably left the city in accordance with her announcement, there is not much chance of obtaining any information through her agency.

"If Gabriel Leonard came up here last night," Nick's reflections ran on, "having no suspicion that he had been robbed by Filbon, and for the purpose of acting in accordance with some arrangement made with Madam Ree, it probably had relation to a matter of money. He may have wanted to obtain the money in the safe, money received after banking hours. Perhaps the sum may have been a respectable one. He says the books were open upon the desk—and that means that the desk was open, showing that Dashwood had left in a hurry—and that from certain marked entries he discovered that Filbon had been robbing him. In that respect he may have spoken the truth. I am inclined to think he did. But he says further that he did not open the safe. He may not have done so, he may have found something which put the idea of opening the safe out of his head. Leonard was terribly upset this morning. There was something weighty on his mind, the nature of which he did not see fit to reveal to me. I obtained only a part of his story. The suppressed part holds a secret that may prove to be of terrible significance. If John Dashwood does not turn up to-day, the work upon which I have entered must include a rigid investigation of the case of Mr. Leonard.

"Now for his movements last night. He came here to get something, money, let me say. He saw the open desk and the books upon it. Did he see anything else? He says he did not learn from the marked entries how much money Filbon had stolen, yet he did not exhibit either surprise or concern when I told him that the amount was twenty thousand dollars. Now, twenty thousand dollars is not a small amount of money. Leonard is not so well off, in a pecuniary sense, as to be able to consider twenty thousand a bagatelle. His unconcern, not assumed, for I was watching him closely, is evidence to me that he knew the amount Filbon had filched. And if he knew it the knowledge must have come to him when he visited the office last night. How did he learn it? Not from going over the books, for he did not remain, according to the barkeeper's story, more than five minutes in the office. When he came down he was greatly agitated, and the barkeeper heard him mutter something about there being the devil to pay. What must I infer from this remark, from his state of mind? One thing, and one thing only: He had learned, without opening the safe, that Filbon had returned the money, and that John Dashwood had gone off with it. And why did Dashwood take the money with him? I can imagine a good reason, but first I must endeavor to discover what it was that gave Leonard his information. A note from Dashwood, of course, and that note was on the desk, probably lying upon one of the books. What became of it? Did Leonard tear it up, or did he put it in his pocket? The fact that he has lied to me shows that he wishes to conceal his knowledge of the note's contents. What would be the action of a man, agitated, confused, beset by troubles, some of which I think I can divine, others of which I can only guess at, upon reading the note which John Dashwood, under last night's conditions, would write? Common sense would not prevail, for common sense would suggest the pocketing of the note and its destruction, if destruction should be deemed necessary, afterward, and in a spot where the fragments would not be found. My judgment is that he tore it into bits here in this room. But the bits did not go into the waste basket, for I have examined it. They were not likely thrown on the floor. Where could they have been thrown?"

Nick's eyes were glued on the large roller-top desk. The open floor space in the middle had not a speck upon it. The back showed the wall paper and baseboard. The drawer sides of the desk concealed the wall back of them. Nick stepped to the desk and rolled it away from the wall. If the janitor had done his full duty that morning, he would find nothing. But the janitor had been amiss, for, partly on the rim of the baseboard and partly on the floor, on one side back of one of the sets of drawers, were torn bits of paper.

The detective quickly gathered the bits, placed them in his pocketbook and then left the office. Before attempting to make a sequential arrangement of the bits, upon which writing had been observed, Nick went to the office of the chief of police in the Four Courts, on Clark Avenue. He had not given his name to the patrolman on the night before, when announcing his discovery of the suicide of Luke Filbon, but had simply said that he was a friend of the chief and would report to that official in the morning. The patrolman was a new hand, and the quiet, authoritative manner of the great detective had its effect. Besides, he was excited over the announcement Nick had made and was off for the nearest signal box as soon as Nick had finished his statement.

When the detective entered the office he found the chief in earnest conversation with the chief of detectives, and he was heartily greeted by each of them. In a few words Nick stated that, while looking for John Dashwood, he had come upon Luke Filbon, just before the taking of the dose of poison.

"Now," he said, "I do not wish to appear as a witness at the inquest, for reasons which any detective officer will appreciate. My presence in St. Louis is known to but few people. I do not wish to announce the fact to the whole city. Leonard will give the reason for the suicide, the bottle of poison and the autopsy report will show the cause of the death. My evidence would be simply cumulative."

"Leonard has been here," said the chief, "and has told us about the robbery. We can get along without you, Nick."

"Thank you, chief. And—did Leonard say anything about Dashwood?"

"He said he was missing, but he hoped he would show up before night. We were discussing the Dashwood matter when you came in. I don't like the looks of things. Dashwood is a sober, honest, clear-headed man of business. He would never leave town without notifying somebody, Leonard or Mrs. Dashwood."

"Mrs. Dashwood is out of town."

"Leonard, then. And, as he did not notify Leonard, I believe there has been foul play."

Nick was of the same opinion, but for hours he had hoped that something—preferaby the appearance of Dashwood himself—might cause him to change it.

"Dashwood is my friend—I shall speak of him as alive, for I will not believe him dead until I see his dead body—and I shall remain here until the mystery of his disappearance has been solved."

"I am glad to hear you say that," said the chief, with pronounced satisfaction. "Take the case, and we will assist you."

A long consultation followed. When it was over Nick went to his room and proceeded without loss of time to put together the pieces of paper he had picked up in Leonard's office. The work was laborious, but it was at last completed. The paper was, as Nick had surmised, a note from Dashwood, written the evening before, and it told a story which stamped Gabriel Leonard as a lair. This is what the note said:

"DEAR MR. LEONARD: This evening I discovered that Luke Filbon, by falsifying the books, was enabled to steal twenty thousand dollars from the company. Filbon came in just as I had finished my examination of the books and not only confessed, but restored the money, which he had secreted in his desk. Before he left, I allowed him to go on his promise to return in the morning for an understanding—I placed the money, all in notes, in the safe, but immediately afterward withdrew them, fearing that Filbon might return and repossess them. I might have changed the combination of the safe, but that would have taken time, and my nerves are not in good condition. Besides, I want to see Filbon again as soon as possible. I don't think I did right in letting him go. Of course, you will see me in the morning, but in the possible event that I may be kept up all night, and, therefore, not reach home, and to make sure that you may understand matters when you come to the office, I have written this note. JOHN DASHWOOD."

There was a cloud on Nick's brow when he had finished reading what Dashwood had written. He now feared the worst.

"Why did Gabriel Leonard keep silent regarding this note?" he said to himself. "And why did he give a false account of his movements after he left the office? Because, in his breast, he holds a guilty secret. I am satisfied that it was Leonard whom the patrolman saw going from Filbon's house toward the river fifteen minutes after another man had gone in that same direction. Supposing that other man to have been John Dashwood, they might have met on the wharf, or near it. What happened when they did meet? If the river knows, the river may hold the secret forever. I must make another trip to that wharf. Last night was not a good time for an exhaustive investigation."

After lunch Nick took a car, rode out Broadway, alighted at the street on which Mrs. Filbon lived and walked down to the wharf. There were a few people near the approaches. They were discussing the suicide, and one of them dropped a remark which caused Nick to stop in his walk.

"Strange that his boat should have been stolen on the night of his death, isn't it?"

"Looks queer, for a fact," said another man. "The verdict will be suicide, of course, but I'm leery on that theory. Maybe the man that stole the boat poisoned Filbon first, gave him the stuff in a drink of whisky, and then planted the bottle by Filbon's side."

"Who would do that?" asked the first speaker. "The man that notified the policeman?"

"Sure. And then he went back and swiped the boat."

"But why would he notify the policeman?"

"Why? To make sure that the bottle of poison would be found before anything might cause it to be removed."

The people soon dispersed. Nick followed the man who had spoken about the boat.

"I have heard of the suicide," he said, as he reached the man's side, "and I am curious to know what this boat business means."

"It means murder, according to my way of thinking," said the man, who had an intelligent, honest countenance, and was in workman's clothes.

"I did not know that Filbon owned a boat."

"He has had it for more than a year. It's a yawl, and he used to keep it in the open part of the wharf. I saw it yesterday, before dark. This morning it was gone."

Further conversation failed to elicit anything of importance. Nick left the man and went out upon the wharf. There was nothing there but a few empty barrels, pieces of rotting lumber and staves. But every part of it was given a searching inspection. Before an overturned barrel, the top hoop of which was broken so that a section half a foot in length stood straight out with its jagged edge, the detective remained for some moments. The circular impression directly behind it was of a nature to show Nick's experienced eyes that the barrel had been overturned but a short time before. Perhaps the overturning had occurred during the night. Nick rolled it aside, keeping his eyes upon the planks. At the first movement something was disclosed which made the detective draw a sharp breath. The something was a lady's brooch of gold, green enameled, made in the form of a lizard. The barrel had not rested upon it, but it had been concealed by the barrel's curve. It was a valuable discovery, but it was not in the line of anything Nick had hoped to find. He knew to whom it belonged, for he had seen it upon the breast of the owner in San Francisco the year before. That person was Cora Reesey, otherwise Madam Ree, who had been Luke Filbon's evil genius and who was the avowed enemy of the great detective.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FLIGHT OF LEONARD.

The finding of Madam Ree's brooch in a locality in which John Dashwood had last been seen introduced an element into the case that deepened the mystery surrounding Dashwood's fate. She, as well as Gabriel Leonard, had been on the wharf the preceding night. And there was the disappearance of the boat. Had she stolen it, or had it been stolen by Gabriel Leonard? And if murder had been done, who was the murderer?

Before attempting to answer these questions, Nick purposed making certain investigations, and having still others made for him. When he returned to town the inquest was over. It had been short, as there were but few witnesses, and these had given testimony directly in point. Gabriel Leonard had testified that Filbon had robbed him, and that John Dashwood must have discovered the robbery and confronted Filbon with the proofs, for on his visit to the office the night before witness had found Filbon's desk open, the books spread out and the false entries marked. The autopsy had revealed the fact that death had resulted from the taking of prussic acid. The phial was introduced in evidence, and the druggist who sold the poison testified that Filbon was the purchaser.

Meeting the chief of police, Nick told the story of the missing boat, and asked that men be detailed to make inquiries along the river, north and south. Boats were already patrolling the river looking for floating bodies. Having disposed of this matter, Nick found a car and in half an hour was at Gabriel Leonard's house, near Forest Park. He had counted on finding no persons at the place but the servants, and was well pleased when the housekeeper informed him that Mr. Leonard would not likely be at home before eight o'clock, more than four hours away.

"He will probably return with Mrs. Dashwood," she said, "for early this morning he sent a telegram so that she take the ten-thirty-five train from Chicago, which will arrive here at seven-twenty-four. Is there any news of Mr. Dashwood?" she added, her motherly face betraying keen anxiety.

"No. But we must hope for the best. How does Mr. Leonard take his son-in-law's disappearance?"

Nick had seated himself in an easy-chair on the veranda and the housekeeper had followed suit.

"He left so early this morning that I didn't have much chance to talk with him. He was very pale and greatly disturbed in mind. He scarcely touched his breakfast."

"Loss of sleep probably accounted somewhat for his appearance?" suggested Nick Carter.

"I don't believe he slept at all," said the housekeeper.

"Did he come in late?" This question was asked without eagerness, in order that the good woman might not suspect that she was being pumped.

"I don't know what time it was, but it was after three o'clock, and not long before daylight."

"What kept him up, I wonder?" said Nick, as if to himself, and not for the benefit of the housekeeper. "Must have been worrying over the Filbon matter. Yes, yes, of course, unless," looking up at the woman as if the thought was of but little importance, yet had been suggested by ordinary curiosity, "unless he told you it was something else."

"I asked him where he had been all night," replied the housekeeper, wholly unsuspicious of the detective's design, "and he said that he had been trying to find Luke Filbon, who had robbed him of a large sum of money."

"Did he seem surprised to learn that John Dashwood had not come home?"

"No. He said that John would probably turn up all right."

"And yet he went off to wire Mrs. Dashwood. That shows, does it not, that he must have feared that harm had come to his son-in-law, and that he concealed his feelings in order not to alarm you. That was the act of a considerate man."

There was no hint of sarcasm in tone of voice or expression of face. The housekeeper took the remarks as Nick had meant them to be taken.

"Yes, that must be it," she said, with a sorrowful shake of the head, "for he knows that I think the world of John Dashwood. A finer man never lived."

Nick nodded his head in approval. Then he said: "I want to write a letter, so that when I go back to town it may go out with the next mail. I have used Mr. Leonard's desk before. Will you permit me to use it again?"

"Certainly, Mr. Carter. You know the way to his rooms. Go right up and help yourself to whatever you may find there."

The detective mounted the stairs to the second story, and entered Gabriel Leonard's den, as he called it, which was one of a suit of three rooms. But he did not go to the writing desk, but passed on to the bedroom.

Everything was in order from bed to closet. The housemaid had been there and had done her work well. Nick found nothing in the room itself to arouse his interest. But in the large closet he paused several minutes. At Leonard's office in town that day the detective, who never allowed the slightest thing to escape his notice, had observed that though it was of the same color, cut and texture, the suit of clothes the manufacturer was wearing was not the same one worn the day before. In the closet the suit of yesterday was found. Nick saw nothing out of the way in the appearance of the coat and vest. But the trousers were stained with clayey mud. In the hip pocket a discolored handkerchief was sticking out. Nick examined it to find a number of large, dark red stains. They were not blood stains, but the stains of some mineral substance. A curious light came into the detective's eyes as he examined them. Replacing the handkerchief in the trousers pocket, he left the closet and went into the den. The writing desk now engaged his attention. The pigeonholes contained letters and bills. These were examined, to be replaced with a shake of the head. All the drawers except one were unlocked. Nothing in the way of evidence was discovered. With his picklock appliance, he speedily unlocked the last drawer. Large envelopes filled with documents met his eye. As he inspected them one by one, his astonishment became so pronounced that he found it hard to repress an exclamation. In one envelope were two letters. The first read as follows:

"San Francisco, May 15, 1904.

"Gabriel Leonard: My last letter, written over six months ago, remains unanswered. Does that mean that you defy me? I should be sorry to believe that you decline to recognize my claim. Perhaps you are not fully aware of the nature of the proofs which are in my hands. Let me inform you that in the case I have against you there is nothing lacking. I have not only photographs, original documents and court transcripts, but a number of letters which you wrote before you had in contemplation the offense which you afterward committed. I write thus guardedly of my proofs in order that the truth may not be guessed at by any third party into whose hands this letter might chance to fall. This is my last appeal to you. If, on receipt of this, you do not at once notify me by telegram or letter that you are willing to treat with me on a cash basis, I shall come to St. Louis and either invoke the aid of the law there or—but I will not threaten. You know how you stand and what you deserve. If I were in your position, I would give every dollar I possessed in the world rather than let the public know what manner of man I am. You have deceived the good people of St. Louis for many years. If you hope to deceive them to the end, come to my terms. Otherwise, a grand smash, the State's prison, infamy and a dishonored grave.

"Cora Reesey."

"That must have stirred Leonard up a little," said Nick to himself. "Yes, it did, for here is a copy of the answer he wrote:"

"St. Louis, May 20, 1904.

"Cora Reesey.

"Madame: You seem determined to crush me. You are not willing to wait for my death—which cannot be far away, for I have had serious heart trouble lately and the doctors give me no encouragement—but wish to strike the blow at once. But for my daughter, I should say, strike and be hanged to you. But her interest must be considered, and, therefore, I say, come to St. Louis and I'll try to make a satisfactory settlement with you. I am certain that a personal conference will be better than a discussion of the matter by letters. I dare not say with a pen what I would say to you orally. If you conclude to come, advise me in advance, so I may meet you on the arrival of the train. Yours, G. Leonard."

In another envelope was a statement showing that Leonard had some weeks before pledged all his stock in the manufacturing company.

The last envelope contained fifty one-hundred dollar notes, on St. Louis, Chicago and Kansas City banks.

In Nick's pocket was the list of the notes which Luke Filbon had stolen. The detective drew it out and when comparison had been made, he saw that all the numbers of the notes found in Leonard's desk were to be found on the list prepared by Filbon. The conclusion was irresistible. Gabriel Leonard had received the stolen money from John Dashwood. He had retained five thousand and had given fifteen thousand to Cora Reesey, alias Madame Ree.

Cool reflection told the detective that there might be a flaw in this theory, for it would involve murder, the murder of John Dashwood. And why should Gabriel Leonard murder John Dashwood to obtain twenty thousand dollars, when the twenty thousand dollars was his own money, which he could obtain by the mere asking for it? There was something yet to be unearthed. The mystery was deepening. A crime had been committed and Gabriel Leonard was implicated, how seriously the future might disclose.

The stains on the trousers indicated that Leonard had been in the mud of the river's shore, but he might have been there, he might have gone off in the boat and still be innocent of the death of John Dashwood. But the stains on the handkerchief? Here was a problem of a different nature. It suggested something that increased the detective's gravity, something that seemed to connect itself with the statement that Leonard had pledged all his stock in the manufacturing company, and, therefore, might be practically bankrupt.

After he had replaced the envelopes, with their contents, in the drawer and had relocked it, Nick went downstairs. There was no one in the hall. Under the stairs was the telephone. Nick went to it and called up the office of the chief of police. At the conclusion of a talk that lasted over a minute, he hung up the receiver and walked out to the veranda. He hoped the housekeeper would not come out, for he wanted to postpone a certain explanation until circumstances should force him to make it. As luck would have it, he was not disturbed until more than half an hour had elapsed. Then arrived the chief of police and the chief of detectives.

Nick spoke a few words when they came up, and then led the way to Leonard's rooms. There the evidence which Nick had discovered was shown to the local officers. The trousers, with the clayey mud and the handkerchief, together with the envelopes found in the drawer of the desk, were taken possession of by the chief of police. As the officers were going downstairs the housekeeper came into the hall.

"A matter of business," said Nick, in an offhand manner. "Mr. Leonard will understand."

"But I don't understand," spoke the good woman.

"I can't explain now," said the detective, gently. "All I can say is that we are acting in the interest of Mrs. John Dashwood."

Sorely perplexed, the housekeeper saw the three agents of the law walk away.

One hour later, at the suggestion of the great detective, the river in front of the wharf was dragged. Nick, expecting and yet fearing that something would be found that would substantiate a theory that pointed to foul play, watched the draggers with painful and yet with eager interest. The space upon which the work was being performed was not large, and before darkness set in the something was brought up from the muck of the river. It was a section of two-inch water pipe about two feet in length, and heavy rust showed when the mud had been removed. Rust and something else, something that spoke of a bloody deed. Adhering to the pipe, under partly detached wafers of rust, were human hairs sticky with a substance that was not rust, but which Nick knew, without analysis, was coagulated blood. The chief of police was present when the iron pipe was brought up, and his superficial examination caused him to come to the same conclusion that had forced itself into the mind of Nick Carter.

"There has been murder done," was the chief's comment, "and this is the instrument of death. We must drag further for the body, though we may not be able to find it on account of the swift current which has been running for several days."

"Yes, that should be done."

Nick would have been better satisfied could an expert's analysis of the stains and the evidence on the iron pipe have been obtained before the arrest of Gabriel Leonard, but there was danger in delay. Leonard must be arrested before he reached home and discovered the loss of the incriminating articles. Two detectives, with Nick, were at the Union Depot for half an hour before the arrival of the Illinois Central train from Chicago. But Gabriel Leonard did not appear. Among the passengers who alighted from the train was a tall, handsome woman, with large, trustful, gray eyes. One of the detectives knew her and pointed her out to Nick as the wife of John Dashwood. She was pale, but composed. There was nothing in her manner to indicate that she had been expecting to meet anyone. And yet she must have come on from Chicago in response to the telegram sent in the morning by Gabriel Leonard. At Nick's request the detective who knew her walked forward and accosted her, just as she was entering the spacious waiting room on her way to the broad stairway leading to the street.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Dashwood," he said. "Can I be of any assistance? Perhaps you are looking for Mr. Leonard?"

"No. I met him at Madison a little over half an hour ago. He won't be home until morning."

Nick Carter heard this statement with deep disappointment.

"Has Mr. Dashwood returned?" Mrs. Dashwood was now the questioner.

"I—I don't know. Perhaps you will find him at home," the detective hurriedly replied.

"I hope so," she said, with an attempt at cheerfulness. "My father said Mr. Dashwood was away on business, and that all sorts of silly stories were afloat, and that I must not believe any of them. I am sure he knows, don't you think so?" she asked, with an appealing air.

"Yes. Of course, he is the best authority."

The detective saw her to a carriage, and then rejoined Nick.

Before fifteen minutes had elapsed the wires were hot with instructions to officers along the line of the railroad from East St. Louis northward, and in towns off the road, to arrest Gabriel Leonard, whose full description was given.

"That's all we can do to-night," said the chief to Nick. "Of course, Leonard won't turn up in the morning of his own accord."

"I don't think he will, and yet——" The detective did not finish the sentence, but sat apparently studying the pattern of the wall paper back of the chief's desk.

"You don't put him as a fool, do you?" queried the chief.

"Anything but that. This is a most peculiar case, however, and surprises are likely to occur. About that analysis," he said, to give a new turn to the conversation. "Will it be ready to-night?"

"Yes, I gave a hurry order."

In a short time the report, made by an analytical chemist and physician, was before them. The stains on the handkerchief taken from the pocket of Gabriel Leonard's trousers were found to be rust stains, and the rust was reported as identical with the rust on the section of water pipe. Also the hairs, brown and silky, upon the pipe, were affirmed to be hairs from the head of a human being, while the substance which assisted in making the hairs adhere to the rust of the pipe was, beyond question, human blood.

"All this looks bad for Leonard," remarked the chief.

"Yes, it does."

"I think I can figure the thing out, Nick. Leonard is in a bad way. He is shy of money. Maybe he has been speculating and has eaten up all his ready cash and all the money he could raise on his factory stock. On top of his pecuniary troubles comes this blackmailing demand of Madame Ree. I can't guess what the secret is, but it is a sure gamble that she has got a strangle hold on Leonard. She demands money and fixes last evening as the time for payment. Leonard, not having been able to scare up the wherewithal, comes to the office in the hope that he may find enough money in the safe to stop the woman's mouth, for a while at least. He discovers that Filbon has robbed him, but has not run off with the money. John Dashwood has it. The amount is more than enough to square the madame's claim. He starts out to find Dashwood, being informed by the note left on the desk that Dashwood has gone to Luke Filbon's house. When near the house, he sees Dashwood, who has been down to the river looking for Filbon, who, not being at home, may have made his way to the river for the purpose of ending his life.

"Now, what follows? Here is my idea of what followed: Leonard killed Dashwood to get the twenty thousand dollars, and threw the body into the river, which may not reveal its secret for a week. Why should he murder Dashwood? Because, Nick, Dashwood, upon the request being made, refused to give up the money. It is very probable that Dashwood knew that Madame Ree had been dogging Leonard. Let us assume that he had seen them together, had overheard some suspicious words. If he had known that they were acquainted, had suspected that a criminal secret existed between them, he must have formed some decided opinion respecting the woman's presence in front of the factory building that night. Therefore he would refuse to hand over the money to Leonard. Angry words may have passed. Dashwood may have mentioned Madame Ree's name and—men have become devils upon less provocation than Leonard may have received. It is certain that murder was not contemplated when Leonard went out to seek Dashwood. The crime was committed on the impulse of the moment, the weapon picked up on the wharf on which they were standing when the conversation took place. And it was Dashwood who was killed that night, for he has brown, silky hair. Now, what do you say to all this?"

"I say," said Nick, solemnly, "that Gabriel Leonard never murdered John Dashwood."

CHAPTER V.

NICK HAS AN ADVENTURE.

The chief of police looked at Nick Carter as if he could not believe the evidence of his ears. "Leonard did not kill Dashwood?" he exclaimed, in surprise and incredulity. "Then, in the name of wonder, who did?"

"I don't know," said Nick, simply.

"Madame Ree?"

"Perhaps."

The chief shook his head. "That was no woman's work, Nick. The murderer was a man, and a strong man. But I'd like to hear what has induced you to come to the conclusion that Gabriel Leonard is innocent."

"I believe him to be innocent of the murder of Dashwood, but guilty of other crimes. Your assumption, chief, that circumstances may have arisen sufficiently strong to make Leonard murder the husband of his daughter, does not appeal to me. I believe that Leonard would have defied Madame Ree, no matter what her hold on him may be, rather than commit a murder, particularly the murder of a man whom he respected and who was dearly loved by Leonard's daughter, for whom Leonard would sacrifice much. But, however much he might sacrifice, whatever he might do, within the law or without the law, he would never commit an act that would plunge her into the depths of sorrow. It is—I hope you will pardon me, chief—preposterous to suppose it.

"We have evidence that he held in his hands the instrument with which murder was probably done. But that is not proof that he did the deed. He may have wrested it from the real murderer. Madame Ree was there, on the evidence of the brooch. She is a strong woman, a regular Amazon. I believe she would commit murder to obtain even a much less sum than twenty thousand dollars. She may have murderously assaulted Dashwood. She may have dealt the fatal blow, have prepared to deal another to find her hand arrested by Leonard, just come upon the scene. Then what would likely follow? I am not maintaining that I am giving you a theory which I look upon as convincing, I am only putting a case that seems to me more reasonable than the one you have outlined.

"Let me assume for the moment that Madame Ree did kill John Dashwood and that Gabriel Leonard witnessed the deed. Would he feel like giving her into custody? I don't think so. There was not only the chance that he would be deeply involved—perhaps the woman might prefer a countercharge, accuse him, in fact, of the murder—but there was also the fact that Dashwood was dead and that no proceedings could bring him to life. Let us suppose, further, that Leonard, accepting the situation thus forced upon him, allowed the woman to keep fifteen out of the twenty thousand dollars taken from the dead man's person, on the promise of immediately leaving town never to return. Now let us suppose that, although the locality was out of the way, and is not patrolled by the police, they feared, in their excitement, to return to town in the usual way. The boat was in plain sight. They took it, rowed down the river some distance, went ashore and turned the boat adrift. The murder must have been committed not far from ten o'clock, probably an hour before I arrived on the wharf and half an hour before Filbon got there. Leonard reached home after three o'clock, so he must have had a three or four hours' walk. He could have covered ten or twelve miles in that time.

"As to Leonard's absence, or flight, that may be explained in this way: This morning he arose, after a few hours' sleep, if he slept at all, with his daughter occupying all his thoughts. She must come home, and, to have her arrive by the first train leaving Chicago, he must wire her at once. Filled with this idea, he hurried downtown, not thinking of the evidence he had left behind. If he thought of it while in town, he may have considered it wholly unlikely that he would be suspected, for who could possibly know of his dealings with Madame Ree? But the conversation I had with him in his office this forenoon may have excited his fears. Just before I left him he said he was going home for lunch. He did not do so. I think he was afraid to go home. But he stayed for the inquest. He may have feared that he was running desperate chances in remaining, but, at the same time, he must have felt that his absence would arouse suspicion, if no suspicion existed before, and that the start in daylight, which he would have to make, would not be sufficient to insure his escape. But as soon as he had given his testimony he left town. I know that this action of his, this fear of the result of possible discoveries at his house, leaves a presumption that he is deeper in the mire than I would have you believe him to be, yet I still stick to my belief that he did not kill John Dashwood. He has disappeared under very suspicious circumstances, but the cause is something unconnected with the death of his son-in-law."

"Have you formed an opinion as to what the cause is?" asked the chief.

"Not a decided opinion, but I have some ideas, which are not yet in shape for explanation. Probably by to-morrow I may speak of them. But we must find Leonard, if possible. There is a double secret in this case, and he holds the key."

Nick Carter had given a theory for the chief to ponder over, but, as he had intimated, it was not one in which, as a whole, he fully believed. Strange ideas had come into his head during the afternoon and evening, and he longed for the presence of Chick in order that he might have assistance in working them out.

The morning came and Gabriel Leonard did not appear. A police officer had been stationed near the manufacturer's house, with instructions to make the arrest should Leonard come home during the day.

The noon train of the B. & O. brought Chick. He was met at the depot by Nick, and together they proceeded to the great detective's rooms on Jefferson Avenue.

Once there and seated, Nick went over the case which involved the disappearance of John Dashwood, and the connection with it of Gabriel Leonard and Madame Ree.

Chick listened with eager attention.

"It seems a clear case against Leonard," he said.

"Yes, at first blush it does. It is too plain to suit me."

After giving the reasons, as stated to the chief of police, for disbelieving that Leonard had murdered John Dashwood, Nick said:

"Outside of the improbability, on account of relationship by marriage and so forth, of Leonard's killing Dashwood, there is the further circumstance that he did not, upon his arrival home in the early morning, attempt to conceal the evidences of his crime. A man guilty of the murder of John Dashwood, no matter how satisfied he may have been in respect of his security from suspicion, would not have allowed the clay stains to remain on the trousers, nor the telltale handkerchief to remain in his closet. And he would never have permitted these incriminating letters and notes to stay in his desk. No, my boy, Leonard is not the man. He had not upon his head the guilt of his son-in-law's death when he went uptown early yesterday morning."

"But, Nick, ought he not to have feared, from what he knew of the night's happenings, that, though innocent, he might be suspected? And would not that suspicion have caused him to take the precaution to put out of the way evidence that would associate him with the crime?"

"Not at the time. He arose early to send off that telegram to his daughter. His conscience was clear of the guilt of Dashwood's murder and, when he left the house, he had not arrived at a sober idea of his situation. And I can imagine another reason which could explain why he acted as he did, and we will immediately proceed to test the theory which it raises. Have you had your breakfast?"

"Yes."

"Then you must begin work at once. You must go down the river."

"In a boat?"

"No. Get a rig. I'll explain on our way to the livery stable."

Nick saw Chick off, and then went to the chief's office.

No trace of the missing boat had been found and the chief was now of opinion that it had been scuttled a[illegible] sunk. Nick coincided with this view.

"Oh," said the chief, "here is something for you, a letter. It came this morning in my care. Looks like a woman's handwriting."

Nick tore open the envelope, which bore the East St. Louis postmark, and found a note which contained these words:

"NICK CARTER: You are on a wrong scent. Give up the pursuit of Gabriel Leonard, wait two days and the truth will come out. You well know I have no love for you, but in this case I am willing to act fairly. You are making a mountain out of a mole hill. This is all. I have made arrangements to leave and will be hundreds of miles away when you receive this. Be guided by m[illegible] advice and you will live to thank me. C. R."

Having read the note, Nick handed it to the chief.

"H'm. She is very mysterious, whoever she is, Nick. 'C. R.' Do you know what the initials mean?"

"Yes. They stand for Cora Reesey, alias Madame Ree."

"Then she is mixed up in this affair, sure enough. But do you believe what she says in the note?"

"I'll answer you in a moment. First, I would like to look at that blackmailing letter which she wrote to Leonard."

The chief opened a drawer, found the letter and gave it to Nick, who compared the writing with the writing on the note.

"A very good imitation," he said, after a few minutes, "and likely to deceive anyone except an expert."

"Then Madame Ree did not write it?"

"No. It was written by Gabriel Leonard. Just what I might have expected."

"What is his little game? I confess I am puzzled."

"It is a waiting game, chief. There is more in this case than has appeared on the surface. By the way, have you heard from Mrs. Dashwood to-day?"

"No."

"Call up the house and ask her if she has heard either from her father or her husband. It is not likely that she has heard from her husband, but her father may have written."

Mrs. Dashwood responded to the call and, in answer to questions, said that her father had written from Madison and had stated that Mr. Dashwood would return home in a few days. Leonard himself might not be able, on account of pressing business, to return before his son-in-law arrived.

The chief passed his hand slowly over his forehead. "What are we up against?" he said, with a puzzled look at Nick. "I have it," he continued, as a thought struck him. "Leonard is keeping his daughter in the dark out of regard for her feelings. She will stay fooled until her father has either been arrested or has left the country."

Nick was toying with the note purporting to have come from Madame Ree, and did not reply.

When he did speak it was not in relation to anything the chief had said. "Who among the business men of St. Louis would be likely to know the names and addresses of Leonard's closest friends?"

"Jasper Swayne, the insurance broker. He was once associated with Leonard in business and has been intimate with him ever since Leonard came to town. His office is in Pine Street."

Nick got the number from the directory and, in a short time, was seated in Swayne's office, talking with that gentleman. What he learned made him anxious to see Chick, who, however, would not probably report before evening.

At Olive and Broadway Nick took a car. As there was a crowd inside he rode on the platform. While the car was passing Twentieth Street he saw a man standing at the edge of the sidewalk, who at sight of the detective wheeled quickly and walked rapidly down Twentieth Street. The man was Carroll Slack, who had been a deputy in the San Francisco county jail at the time of the escape of James Dorrant the year before. He had been in love with Madame Reesey before the events which had culminated in the death of Dorrant, and his presence in St. Louis at this time was, to Nick's mind, a suspicious circumstance. Although he had not been criminally implicated in the crimes which the great detective had unearthed while he was in the Pacific Coast metropolis, Nick had looked upon him as of weak moral fiber, one who could be easily led astray by a beautiful, designing woman.

The detective motioned to the conductor, the car stopped and the pursuit at once began. Slack kept up his rapid walk to Chestnut Street, then turned into it and went north. Nick reached the corner just in time to see Slack disappear through a small opening at the further end of a high board fence, inclosing a large vacant lot, back of some business buildings, fronting on Market Street, opposite the Union Depot.

There might be a trap in store, but Nick, in view of the importance of the pursuit, determined to risk the danger. He came to the opening just as Slack was entering the door of a wooden lean-to of one of the brick buildings. From his observation of the locality, taken while passing the block many times, either on his way to the depot or the court buildings, Nick was satisfied that his quarry had gone into an unoccupied section of the block. In the early days of the fair the rooms, sandwiched between a cheap hotel and a ticket scalper's office, had been the headquarters of a band of fakers, whose operations, not coming within the limits of the law, had been summarily discountenanced by the police.

There was the possibility, which on account of the former deputy jailer's good record, had in it strong elements of reason, that Slack was really trying to evade Nick Carter and that he hoped by darting through the vacant rooms, to slip through to Market Street and on into one of the nearby hotels or saloons, where back way exit to safety might be found.

Nick opened the door of the lean-to and entered what had been intended for a kitchen. Probably the rooms had last been put to legitimate use by a restaurateur. There was no one in the room and Nick, without a moment's pause, hurried toward another, the middle room beyond, the door of which was partly open. At the threshold he stopped, and struck the door a resounding blow, which caused it to fly backward against the wall. Nothing of a suspicious nature met his gaze. The room, as far as he could see, was bare. While walking slowly in, so as to guard against a possible surprise from some unexpected quarter, a heavy body struck him on shoulders and back, and he was borne violently to the floor. Over the door was a wide shelf, and from that shelf a man had leaped. The suddenness as well as the force of the assault caught Nick without that tension of mind and muscle which is of such efficacy at critical times.

For a moment he lay flat on his stomach, the while his adversary was reaching to grasp his windpipe. Then, with a mighty effort, Nick Carter called all his wonderful strength into play. With one hand planted on the floor he turned sidewise, made a sudden twist and flung Slack off. But the former deputy jailer was as quick in movements as a cat, and he had rolled over and clutched Nick about the waist before the detective could make an offensive move. The two instantly became locked in a deadly embrace. Nick was the more powerful and scientific, but Slack was a strong man and he fought as if for his life.

He soon gained an advantage, but it was not lasting. Nick, upon Slack's initial onslaught, had sprained his ankle, and the San Franciscan, in exerting all his energies to bring the detective's back to the floor, unintentionally pressed his legs against the injured member, twisting it so that Nick, in the intensity of his pain, slightly relaxed his hold and was rolled over in consequence.

The detective fell face upward and, upon the instant he reached that position, his hands went up and grasped Slack by the throat. As the grip tightened, Slack struck out blindly, but his hands soon grew nerveless, while his eyes began to start from their sockets. At the right moment Nick, with a supreme effort, raised himself and threw his enemy backward, and the next instant was sitting on the man's chest.

"Give up?" he asked.

"Yes," came in a labored, husky voice. "I'm a quitter, all right."

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERY OF ROOM M.

Not until the detective had tied Slack's hands, removed his weapons, a pistol and knife, and propped him against the wall, did he move away. After he had bathed his ankle with water found in the kitchen and satisfied himself that the sprain was not a bad one, Nick opened his batteries on his prisoner.

"Slack," said he, more in sorrow than in anger, "this is a strange part for you to play. What has come over you? In San Francisco you were an honest man, a defender of law and order."

"Every man for himself, that's my motto," replied Slack, sullenly.

"That is dodging the question. What have I ever done to you that you should jump me?"

"You have stuck your nose into my concerns, that's what you have done," was Slack's savage outburst.

Nick looked at the man curiously.

"I think I understand," he said, quietly. "You are under the thumb of Cora Reesey, otherwise Madame Ree. She has taken you into her good graces again. You came here to meet her. You find her gone and you get the notion into your head that I am responsible for her disappearance. Well, you are wrong. I have had no dealings of any kind with Madame Ree since her arrival in St. Louis. I had no hand in sending her away and I don't know where she is. It is very evident, though, that she has given you the icy mitt."

Slack's face was a study while Nick was speaking.

"Do you mean to say that you have neither driven her nor given a tip to the chief of police which has caused her to be driven from St. Louis?"

"I am not a liar," returned Nick, coldly. "What I say goes with those who know me."

"I beg your pardon," said Slack, humbly. "I have been a fool. I thought you had mixed up in my affairs—for I'm going to marry Madame Ree—and I made up my mind to get even."

"When did you arrive in town?"

"Yesterday. Cora was expecting me, had written me to come. I found her gone, I learned from a police officer of my acquaintance that you were here, and I at once connected Cora's disappearance with your presence."

"You saw me quite by accident, didn't you?"

"Yes. I have been laying for you all day. I hired these rooms and my plan was to lure you here, jump you and keep you a prisoner until I had found Cora, who might deal with you as she liked."

"You were not holding out an alluring prospect for me, Slack," said Nick, dryly.

"I was mad, crazy," said Slack, penitently. His manner since his fight with the great detective had undergone a complete change. He was no longer aggressive, vindictive. The good in his disposition was coming uppermost. Nick saw that he was in condition for full confession, but to obtain it he took the least offensive way.

"See here, Slack," said he, in a friendly tone, "you will have reason to congratulate yourself over this affair of to-day. And it is due to your good luck that you did not meet Madame Ree on your arrival. She wrote to you to come, not because she loves you, but for the reason that she wanted help in an unlawful undertaking. Money is her passion. You ought to know that."

Slack winced slightly. Nick went on: "She may have revealed to you what her plans were and she may have held out a bait which you swallowed. Now, without having seen her, without having interfered with her in the slightest degree, I know what her plans were, and my knowledge has come through events associated with the disappearance of John Dashwood and the suicide of Luke Filbon. If you have read the newspapers you know something concerning these matters."

"I have read the papers, and I know what the public knows."

"Very well. Now I'll tell you something which the public does not know." Then Nick proceeded to lay bare the blackmailing scheme which Cora Reesey, alias Madame Ree, had concocted with Gabriel Leonard as the victim.

"If she got fifteen thousand dollars from Leonard," said Slack, with a black frown, "she has skipped the country."

"She got it all right. I am entirely satisfied on that point."

"Then I'm sure in the soup," was Slack's desponding utterance. "She wanted me to come and help her out, but she has corralled the money without my assistance, and now she has no use for me."

"It looks that way, doesn't it? If she really meant to deal squarely with you, she would have written a letter after she had closed the deal with Leonard."

"That's right. I see it all now. I'm a double-distilled jackass." Then his face hardened and his eyes gleamed cruelly. "I may meet her some day," he said, "and if I do, I'll"—he clinched his hands—"I'll make her wish she had never been born."

After a pause, he added: "I know enough now to send her to prison."

Nick, taking counsel with himself, stepped forward and cut the cords which bound Slack's hand. "Now you may talk with more ease," he said.

"Thank you." Slack opened and shut his hands several times to get the blood in proper circulation, and then resumed his story: "I know what her hold on Leonard is, and it's partly sham."

Nick's eyes glistened.

"You assisted her in preparing it, didn't you?"

"Yes, and if you'll go easy with me on the bughouse break I made to-day, I'll tell you all about it."

"It's a whack," said Nick, instantly.

"Then here goes: The claim she pretends to have on Leonard embraces bigamy and embezzlement. She well knew, if Leonard refused to come to her terms and she published what she held in her hand as alleged facts, that though Leonard's reputation might suffer, he could never be proceeded against criminally."

The word "bigamy" brought a shadow to Nick Carter's face, for his mind reverted instantly to the fair, gentle daughter of Leonard, Mrs. John Dashwood. The shadow lifted before Slack had finished his narrative.

"Leonard, whose real name is Reesey, went to California in the early fifties," said Slack, "and while there married an Italian woman, a widow with one child. Her name was Massona. Shortly after her marriage with Reesey and before the birth of her daughter, her husband embezzled the funds of a mining company of which he was secretary, and skipped the State. Instead of returning to his former home in Ohio, he went to St. Louis, assumed the name of Leonard and engaged in business. Years passed, and, perhaps believing his Italian wife to be dead, he married again. When Cora Reesey, his daughter by the Italian wife, reached womanhood, she discovered by secret inquiry that her father was alive and in St. Louis. But she died before she could make practical use of her knowledge. While on her sick bed she confided what she had discovered to her cousin and intimate friend, Lucia Massona. This cousin is an adventuress, a woman of surpassing beauty and an evil heart. She resolved to profit by what she had learned and when she left the up-country mining town, where her cousin had lived and died, she took the name of the dead one and, as Cora Reesey, appeared in San Francisco. In that city she laid her plans for blackmailing Gabriel Leonard. I, in my senseless infatuation for her, promised and gave assistance in preparing the proofs. I soon discovered that she had no criminal case against Leonard, for her aunt, Mrs. Reesey, had died three days prior to her husband's second marriage. This fact did not disconcert her, for she believed that Leonard did not know whether his Italian wife was alive or dead when he contracted his St. Louis marriage, and that the spurious documents which she had prepared would be accepted as genuine. The embezzlement matter, of course, was outlawed. But the threat to publish the facts would be sufficient, she thought, to bring him to terms.

"Cora went to St. Louis after correspondence with Leonard, with the understanding that I was to follow on receipt of a letter which she promised to write soon after arrival here. The letter reached me five days ago and I came on without an instant's loss of time. That is the story, Mr. Carter."

Nick looked at his watch.

"Time I was going," he said, and moved toward the door.

"Am I free to go, too?" asked Slack, in a respectful tone.

"Certainly you are. Take care of yourself, keep out of mischief, is all the advice I have to give."

"But," looking at the detective slyly, "I may meet Cora, she may throw her grappling hooks on me again, and I may put her wise about you and what you know."

"I'll trust you," said Nick, with a smile.

"Sure you are not afraid I may fall down?"

"Not in the least, Slack. Good-by."

Nick limped out of the building and half an hour later was in his room on Jefferson Avenue. Chick, to his satisfaction, was there to meet him. His face shone with excitement and pleasure. "Great news, Nick," he said. "I've located Leonard."

"Where is he?" Nick's face was now as bright as Chick's.

"In a big brick building, used as a private sanitarium, beyond the southern limits of the city."

"Dr. Holcomb runs the sanitarium, doesn't he?"

"Yes," regarding the great detective in astonishment. "How did you know?"

"I obtained a list of Leonard's friends to-day and among them, as the closest and most intimate of all, is the name of Dr. Holcomb. He was a mining partner of Leonard in California many years ago. I have been anxious to see you, Chick, so that I might put you on, but you have already done the trick. You are a wonder, Chick."

The young detective blushed with pleasure.

"The building is set in the middle of spacious grounds and is well guarded. Its appearance excited my curiosity and I made a few cautious inquiries before venturing near the main gate. I was made up as a hobo, as you know, and I was giving the guard outside the gate a fill about experiences on the road, when a closed carriage drove up and two men alighted. One I took to be Dr. Holcomb; the other, from your description, I identified as Gabriel Leonard. They did not notice me and I slipped out of sight while the guard was opening the gate."

"I wonder where Leonard and the doctor had been?" said Nick, thoughtfully. "Perhaps Leonard had been hiding out of the city, had got a note to his friend, the doctor, and the doctor went to bring him to safer quarters."

"That's it, Nick, I'll bet."

"Is this sanitarium near the river?"

"Yes; the grounds extend to the levee. And now, what's the program? Shall we notify the chief, get a force of men, go out there, surround the place and catch our man?"

"No. Such a move might spoil all. Leonard at bay might commit suicide. I want his confession. And I want something else. I have in mind a plan which, I think, will bring us victory. About this outside man at the sanitarium. Is he an American?"

"No; a Swede with long, fair hair and whiskers to match."

"Are his duties confined to the outside?"

"It's turn about with the attendants. I learned this when I struck the Swede for a dime. He refused and told me to tackle the man whose turn for outside duty would come to-morrow.

" 'I tank he ban easy,' he said."

"Then the Swede is not easy. Therefore, he cares for money. But how to reach him? We don't even know his name."

"I know it," said Chick. "Dr. Holcomb called him Detson."

"Ah, now I see daylight. Go downstairs and borrow a directory, Chick."

When the directory was before him Nick turned to the D's and found two Detsons, one a spinster dressmaker, called Hannah, the other a hospital attendant, called Christian.

"Hannah is probably the sister and she lives on Locust Street. My ankle troubles me or I would go over there myself."

"I'll go; it's only a few blocks," said Chick. "What shall I say to her?"

"If she proves to be Christian's sister, ask her how often she sees her brother and when. Christian may have regular hours for visiting his sister. Perhaps he comes every day. I hope he does. In explanation of your questions, say a friend of yours wishes to see her brother on important business."

Chick was gone an hour. When he returned he was whistling.

"Christian is the brother, all right," he said to Nick, "and he will be at his sister's this evening. Hours from eight to ten o'clock."

"Good. And did you learn anything about Christian's affairs, any family history and so forth? I did not ask you to go into any such matters, for I knew you would take advantage of circumstances and get all there was coming to you."

"Say, she is a peach, Nick," returned Chick, enthusiastically. "A pretty, plump, flaxen-haired angel. Her brother is the apple of her eye. He is saving up money to send for the old mother in Sweden and she is helping all she can. I hadn't been with her ten minutes before she was telling me the story of her life."

"Then the way is easy, Chick. Christian will jump at the chance of securing a neat sum in a lump. But he must first be assured that he will be doing a creditable thing. If he is on the square, as he probably is, from your account, I think I can convince him that in assisting me he is not only benefiting himself, but is also doing a commendable act."

The two detectives then put their heads together, con[illegible]sing earnestly until dinner time came. That evening Nick had a long and satisfactory talk with Christian Detson.

"Dey ban some man ho would yump at dat chance," he said, at the end of the conversation, "but ay look bayfore ay do any yumpin'. Ay tank ay see where ay ban land vurst."

Late in the forenoon of the next day Dr. Holcomb received a new patient, a young man of powerful physique, who gave no trouble, for his mania was not a violent one. The certificate which his conductors, two well-known business men of St. Louis, presented, set forth that he was suffering from acute dementia. His face was drawn, his eyes were lusterless and his mouth gave a clicking sound, but no words came, whenever he was spoken to.

"I don't think there is any hope for him," said Dr. Holcomb, to the men who had brought the subject, "for dementia such as he is afflicted with is generally the last stage before death. He may live a year, he may die in a month."

"I would ask," said one of the men, Maj. Haines, a lawyer, "that you do not confine him. He is of good family and we are willing to pay well for his care. As you must know, from your experience with such cases, he is perfectly harmless. But he cannot take care of himself. He needs the attention that is given to a child. You need not give him the run of the grounds, though you might do so with entire safety, but I shall be pleased if he is given the run of the building, locking him up, of course, every night."

"There is no objection to such an arrangement," said the doctor. "The attendants about will see that he does not get into trouble."

And so the matter was arranged which installed James Winters as an inmate of Dr. Holcomb's sanitarium.

For an hour after his entrance the demented patient sat upon the floor in one of the corridors and played with his hands. Attendants passed him without a glance, for they were used to such sights. At noon he was taken into a small room intended for his future use, and given some soup and potatoes. Apparently he did not know how to put the food into his mouth and had to be assisted as a babe newly weaned would have been.

About the middle of the afternoon, while he was in a small corridor, which, opening out of a larger one, terminated at the side wall, an attendant, marvelously like the Swede Chick had accosted outside the gate the day before, came up and spoke to him in a low voice.

"How does it go, Chick?" Have you made any discoveries?"

"I know where Leonard's room is, Nick. He has been out of it twice to-day, once to see the doctor and once to enter Room M, a few doors beyond his own. And how are you making out?"

"My task is harder than yours, Chick. My disguise is good. I have got the lay of the wards and rooms, and my duties are understood, thanks to Detson, but I have to dodge the other attendants whenever I can, for there is the possibility that some sharp eyes may spot the imposture. We must, if possible, finish our work here within twenty-four hours. I'd like to have the round-up take place to-day."

"Do you anticipate any trouble?"

"No. Dr. Holcomb enjoys a good reputation, and I am satisfied that he will not interfere with the course of justice. Leonard is an old-time friend of his and he has, without doubt, been imposed upon. He does not know, of course, that Leonard is suspected of murder. He is harboring his friend, but with the idea, I believe, that Leonard is simply dodging his creditors."

The sound of steps along the long, wide corridor stopped Nick Carter's talk with his assistant. Leaving Chick the detective went forward and saw Dr. Holcomb in the act of ascending the stairs to the second story. Halfway up he stopped, frowned, and then turned back. At the foot of the stairs his eyes fell on the person of the bogus Swede.

"Detson," he called out, sharply, "I wish you would keep in sight. I have forgotten my instrument case. Go to the office, tell my assistant to give it to you and when you get it bring it to Room M."

"Ay tank ay ban go queeck," said Nick, and away he hurried to the office. Soon, with the case in his hand, he went up the stairs, found the room, knocked at the door with an impatience which he had much difficulty in repressing. Dr. Holcomb opened the door and the detective tried to peer into the room. To his disappointment he was unable to see more than the foot of a bed upon which some person was lying. The doctor received the instrument case, uttered a curt "Thank you," and quickly closed the door.

Nick would have remained by the door, but a moment after it closed Gabriel Leonard opened the door of a room opposite the head of the stairs and came toward him. His eyes were bloodshot and there were marks of suffering on his face. The detective passed him halfway to the stairs, but Leonard did not look at the pseudo Detson. With his head bent he walked quickly to Room M and entered without knocking.

Nick hastened downstairs, saw Chick, and, seizing an opportunity when the corridor was clear, whispered a few rapid words. Chick nodded his head in comprehension and, leaving the great detective, slouched along the corridor, mounted the stairs and walked toward Room M. Once there he sat down with his back against the door. He had been in that position about fifteen minutes when conversation inside caused him to prick up his ears. He waited with every sense alert and his heart beating at an unusual rate for ten minutes more, then, rising to his feet, flew rather than ran until he reached Nick.

"Well?" said the great detective, quickly, his curiosity on edge.

"You were right, right, Nick," said Chick, in a gasp. "The mystery will be solved in Room M. I have heard them talk. The last words of Leonard were: 'The hour has come. Now, good-by to St. Louis.' "

CHAPTER VII.

OUT OF DEATH'S SHADOW.

Nick breathed heavily. The end was approaching. Chick's information told him that.

"We've got Leonard in a box," said Chick. "We can drop on him right now, if you say so."

"Now is not the time. We will wait until he comes out. Go up the stairs again, sit on the top step and when Leonard enters his own room, let me know. If he does not go to his room, but comes downstairs, follow him and inform me. I may be at the foot of the stairs when he leaves Room M. I shall try to be there. Now go."

The approach of an attendant caused Nick to cut short his talk and walk slowly away.

Chick sat at the top of the stairs for nearly half an hour. Then Gabriel Leonard came out of Room M, and with quick steps hastened forward. He stopped near the stairs and stood for a few minutes looking, not at Chick, of whose existence he seemed to have no realization, but over and beyond him. Biting his lips nervously, he muttered: "I've got to go," and, turning, went to his room across the way. Chick noted with satisfaction that Leonard did not lock the door after entering the room. Nick stood at the foot of the stairs. Unobserved by Leonard he had seen the manufacturer and knew that the time [illegible] strike had come. Up the stairs he went and, walking over to Leonard's room, opened the door and stepped in. Chick followed, the door was closed quickly and the key turned in the lock.

Gabriel Leonard, sitting dejectedly on his bed, glanced up when the two detectives entered, but without suspicion. But when the door was locked he sprang to his feet, a wild fear in his eyes.

"What does this mean?" he demanded, harshly, though his lips trembled and his body was shaking.

"It is time the masks were discarded," replied the great detective, soberly. "I am Nick Carter and this is my assistant, Chick. We have been on your trail ever since the inquest. Now we have found you, what have you got to say for yourself? What do you know in reference to the disappearance of John Dashwood?"

The manufacturer's countenance was gray with terror when Nick began his speech, but at the close, this expression had gone. He sighed as if with relief as the last word was spoken.

"I have laid myself open to suspicion," he said, as his wits began to return, "but the time for concealment has passed. I am now ready to tell the truth and the whole truth, and"—his tone now became tinctured with acrimony—"when I shall have done so, I shall hope for some consideration at your hands."

"You shall receive what you are entitled to," returned Nick, coldly. "I am not your enemy. I represent society and I am the friend of John Dashwood."

Leonard's face brightened in spite of the detective's words and tone. "Before I begin," he said, "I wish to ask one question. Did you, or the chief of police, or any of his officers search my house the other day?"

"Yes."

"And found——"

"Found your correspondence with Madame Ree, five thousand dollars in notes, a portion of the money Filbon stole and which John Dashwood took away that night, and muddy trousers and a rust-stained handkerchief."

Leonard exhibited no surprise.

"I thought so," he said. "Then the whole story must be told."

"Yes," repeated Nick Carter, "the whole story must be told."

The manufacturer resumed his seat on the bed. Nick and Chick found chairs. Nick sat near the door with his back to it. Chick sat on the other side of Leonard and [illegible] the window.

"Well," began the manufacturer, "the whole trouble took a start when this woman, who called herself Cora Reesey, and my daughter, wrote her first letter from San Francisco. I was not afraid of the embezzlement matter, for I have paid up every cent I appropriated. I was young and reckless in my California days, but I repented when I grew older. But I did fear an arrest for bigamy, though God knows I thought I was a widower when I married my second wife here in St. Louis."

"And you were a widower," said Nick, quietly. "I know it. Cora Reesey deceived you."

Gabriel Leonard's expression of astonishment at this statement was speedily succeeded by one of anguish. He licked his lips and looked toward the wall with eyes contracted in pain.

"Deceived me, did she?" he muttered, brokenly. "What a fool, what a fool I have been."

Nick Carter's cool gaze recalled Leonard to the work of explanation, which he had undertaken to do.

"Where was I? Oh, yes, I remember."

He spoke with his eyes on the floor. The slight buoyancy with which he had begun his story was gone. His words now came slowly and gravely. "I wrote to the woman that it might be well for her to come to St. Louis. She acted upon the suggestion and came. At our first interview she demanded fifteen thousand dollars as the price of her silence. I did not have the money. My affairs, within one week, had become badly involved. Some speculative ventures had proved utter failures. But all attempts to induce the woman to wait were unavailing. She did not believe me when I told her that I was on the brink of ruin, and she threatened that if I did not have the money on a certain night, to go the next day to a newspaper office, tell her story and produce her vouchers. The night set for the payment of the fifteen thousand dollars was the night of the disappearance of John Dashwood."

Leonard ceased speaking, went to the water cooler in a corner, drew a glass of water, drank it, and then returned to the bed.

"I went uptown that night," he continued, "without any definite idea of what I should do. In front of the office the thought struck me that perhaps there might be sufficient money in the safe—receipts after banking hours—to stop the woman's mouth for a few days. I had promised to meet her at midnight at her rooms in an apartment house on Manchester Avenue. She had said that she would give me all day for the work of digging up the money and the day would end at twelve o'clock. I went to the office and, after opening the door and striking a light, saw by the open desk and the open books that some one, probably Filbon, had been there that evening. Upon one of the books lay a folded note addressed to me. It was from John Dashwood and it informed me that I had been robbed and that Dashwood, having recovered the stolen money, twenty thousand dollars, had placed it in his pocket for safe-keeping. Imagine my feelings, if you can. Twenty thousand dollars! I did not think of my creditors then, but of Cora Reesey. Here was money with which I could pay her, silence her mouth forever. I must find Dashwood. He had gone to seek Filbon, who would probably be found at home. Hurriedly I left the office, found a car and got to Filbon's house, to discover that the lights were out. I went around the house softly, listened carefully at doors and windows, but could hear nothing. I might have aroused Mrs. Filbon, but I did not think it would be of any use. Besides, I did not wish to disturb her, unless it should be absolutely necessary to do so.

"Why I walked toward the water instead of toward Broadway and the car line, I do not know. A hard fate controlled my movements"—he sighed heavily—"and I went to meet—trouble. On reaching the wharf I saw, at the water end, a man and a woman. Their backs were toward me and they were talking, the woman angrily, the man calmly but firmly. The woman was Cora Reesey, the man John Dashwood. 'I tell you, Gabriel Leonard will approve,' I heard her say. 'He is a bigamist and he promised to pay me the money to-night. You will be doing him a favor by handing it over to me.'

"'Before I do anything of the kind I must have an authorization,' Dashwood said, 'and so you will have to wait until to-morrow. I don't know what Mr. Leonard will do, then, but I know what I would do if I were in his place. I would put you in jail for blackmail. I would defy you to do your worst.'

"'You would, would you?' she hissed, and then I saw her arm shoot out. There was a knife in her hand and she struck to kill, but owing to Dashwood's quick movement aside, only cut the flesh of his arm. But the force of her rush sent her forward past him, and her dress caught on a projecting broken piece of hoop on a barrel, and she stumbled and fell, bringing the barrel with her.

"I was hurrying forward," Leonard went on, his voice now showing some animation, "when I saw her arise with some heavy substance in her hand. It was a section of old iron pipe, which was within sight and reach when she fell. Before I could get to her she struck John Dashwood, who was looking not at her but at me at the time, a powerful blow on the head. I got to the scene to find Dashwood lying senseless on the planking and Cora Reesey busily engaged in searching his pockets for the bank notes.

"At my approach she lifted her head. The notes were in her hand.

"'So it is you,' she said, coolly. 'Very well, then, for I here make acknowledgment that I have received the money agreed upon as my price for keeping silent regarding certain events in your past life.'

"Without answering her I bent over Dashwood and placed my ear against his heart. It was beating faintly. He might live. But I did not voice my hope to her. Instead, I said: 'You have killed him.' 'I don't care,' was her cold, heartless reply. 'And I am safe,' she added, quickly, 'for you will not betray me. You dare not open your mouth against me, for if you do, I will tell my story and denounce you as the murderer.'

"Again imagine my feelings. I could not do as I wished, for I was in this terrible woman's power. I said: 'Have no fear. I shall keep my lips closed.' 'Good,' was her response, 'and for your discretion I will give you five thousand dollars. Fifteen thousand will suffice for me.' She counted out the money and handed it to me. I took the notes and put them in my pocket. Next she gave me the documents which she had obtained in California. These I examined by the aid of matches and finding them to be as represented, I tore them up and threw the pieces in the river. When the woman had gone, my first impulse was to hunt up a policeman, have the nearest station notified and John Dashwood removed to the rec[illegible]ing hospital. But as I stood on the wharf, my eyes fell on Luke Filbon's boat. I wished to escape, if possible, the notoriety with which I must be invested if the assault became public property, of the danger to which I might be subjected if John Dashwood died. The sight of the boat suggested a way to avoid publicity. I could take Dashwood down the river to my friend, Dr. Holcomb's, sanitarium. There he would be properly treated and, while under treatment, I would be given time for arranging my affairs, preparatory to leaving St. Louis."

"And Dashwood?" asked Nick, as Leonard paused for a moment. "Is the danger point passed?"

"Yes. The operation which restored his reason was performed this afternoon. He will live, he will have [illegible] mind. If you wish to see him, come with me."

Leonard arose. Nick removed his facial disguise, unlocked the door and the three men passed out. They entered Room M, to find Dr. Holcomb in the act of cleaning his instruments.

The room was large, and beyond the bed was a large operating table. Upon it, his head propped by pillows, haggard and thin, but with the light of reason in his eyes, lay John Dashwood.

CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER'S DENUNCIATION.

"Hello, Nick," was Dashwood's cheerful greeting, as his eyes fell on the face of his friend, the great detective, "I'm glad to see you, awfully glad, for I reckon I've been through the valley of the shadow."

Nick took Dashwood's hand and pressed it gently. But their conversation was short, as excitement at that time was to be avoided.

"He will be as good as new in a few weeks," said Dr. Holcomb, when Nick, Chick and Leonard were outside the door and, after the reason of Nick's appearance in disguise had in a measure been explained. "He came here with a fractured skull and to-day, the conditions being favorable, I removed a piece of bone which was pressing on the brain and which would, if permitted to remain, have affected his memory."

Dr. Holcomb returned to his patient, and Leonard, followed by the two detectives, went back to his room. The door was again closed and locked.

"You brought Dashwood here, Mr. Leonard," said Nick, when they were all seated, "and turned him over to Dr. Holcomb. What sort of story did you tell the doctor?"

"I said that Dashwood was the victim of a murderous assault, that I was present and tried to prevent it, and that for good reasons, family reasons, I did not want the facts to get to the public. The doctor knows me of old and he asked no embarrassing questions."

"Now as to your after actions, some of which were peculiar. I desire a full explanation."

"They can easily be explained. I went home, the doctor's carriage taking me to within a few blocks of my house. I was utterly exhausted, but I could neither sleep nor think coherently. My main anxiety was my daughter. It was essential that she should be at home. I arose early, with my mind on no other subject, swallowed a hasty breakfast and hurried uptown to a telegraph office. After I had sent the telegram I went to the office in the factory building, to try to compose my thoughts, to figure out what I ought to do. I soon convinced myself that the occurrences on the wharf were unknown to the police, but I was worried somewhat when, on looking over the morning papers, I learned of the suicide of Luke Filbon. His body had been found under the wharf an hour or more after the time of the assault on Dashwood. Had he witnessed it? Had he left behind any statement? I was considering this matter when you, Mr. Carter, came in. I did not tell you the truth. I could not, and now you know why I could not. After you had gone, I studied over what you had said, and the fear that you were working on the Dashwood case was allied with another fear that you suspected me, and that your suspicions might induce you to make a visit to my house, for the purpose of investigation. When I returned home the night before, I placed the five thousand dollars in notes in a drawer, which I always kept locked. In the morning I changed my clothes. On leaving the house to send the telegram I gave no thought to the notes, the other articles in the drawer or anything else, for at that time I believed I was safe from suspicion of any knowledge of what had happened on the wharf. Now, hours afterward, in my office, the fact was borne home to me that if you did search my rooms, you would have cause for the gravest suspicion, for the muddy trousers and the handkerchief which was stained with rust from wiping my hands upon it after I had picked up and thrown into the river the section of pipe used as a weapon by Cora Reesey would speak against me. And there were the notes and the correspondence. I thought of all these matters and realized what a fool I had been in leaving the suspicious evidences behind. But I dared not go home and I dared not attempt to leave town before the inquest, for I might be already under surveillance, and attempted flight would be looked upon as an admission of guilt. In an agony of mind impossible to describe, I stayed in town until after I had given in my testimony before the coroner. Then, in desperation, I resolved to flee. I must take chances of arrest. But I was not molested. I went to a remote section of the city, telephoned to Dr. Holcomb to call for me at a certain house next day—that was yesterday—and then resigned myself to circumstances. The doctor came, and I explained my situation by saying that my business affairs were badly tangled and that, for the benefit of all concerned, it was necessary for a few days that I should keep away from my creditors."

"Why did you write a note to me signed 'C. R.'?" asked Nick.

"Because I wanted to stave off a discovery of John Dashwood's retreat until the operation should have been performed."

"Have you allowed your daughter all these days to remain in ignorance of her husband's whereabouts and condition?"

"I have relieved her mind," said Leonard, impatiently and nervously. "I met her train at Madison, while she was on her way from Chicago to St. Louis, and I there informed her that John was all right and would show up in a few days. Since then I have written to her, my words carrying the same assurance. She believes in me, Mr. Carter"—the look which he bestowed on Nick was pathetic—"and if I have deceived her it has been for her own good. To-day she shall know the truth, and to-morrow will find her at her husband's bedside."

"And you—you are going away, are you? Why, if I may ask?"

Nick's voice was not pleasant. It was sharp, severe.

"Because my business is a failure; because I am sick of St. Louis; because, with the few thousands I have secured I may make a fresh start in some new section of the country; because I dislike notoriety and Dashwood's story will——"

"Will bring you into the limelight, eh?"

"Yes; that's it."

Nick looked hard at Leonard.

"You are a queer man, Mr. Leonard," he said. "Shrewd in some respects, utterly lacking in shrewdness in others. Let me see, have you explained everything? There is the matter of Luke Filbon's boat. What did you do with it? Turn it adrift, or scuttle it?"

"I—I scuttled it," replied Leonard, with a start.

"So I reasoned. And why did you scuttle it?"

"Because I feared that it might show blood stains from John Dashwood's wound. The scuttling was a necessary precaution in the justifiable game I was playing."

"Now let me see if I understand the case," said Nick, judicially. "Everything you have done has been mainly in the interest of Mrs. Dashwood, your daughter. Incidentally, you have remembered yourself and you have taken some interest—a commendable interest, I will admit—in Dashwood. You shun notoriety, you want to preserve your good name, to let the dead past bury its dead, and if in carrying out the plan you have mapped out, your creditors suffer, what of that? It is better so, better for the officers of the law, who will be spared work and bother, better for Gabriel Leonard, who, amid new scenes, with at least five thousand dollars in his pocket, may begin life over again."

"I do not intend to cheat my creditors," said Leonard, in uneasiness, touched with anger. "I intend to pay them to the last dollar. If I compel them to wait, they shall have full interest."

"Yes, I suppose so," remarked Nick, quietly. "A very fine program; but I am compelled to inform you, Mr. Leonard, that you will not be able to carry it out."

"Not carry it out?"—a new fear stealing into his face—"and why not?"

Nick Carter arose to his feet. "Because," he replied, in a voice that cut Leonard like a whip, "because your little game will not work. You have told a story which in many particulars is true. But a part of it is false, and there are some things which you have not touched upon. You have not prepared to leave St. Louis because your business affairs are in bad shape. You have not concealed John Dashwood solely for the purpose of staving off a little notoriety, which a yarn such as you have told to me would have rendered harmless. Your alarm over the discoveries made in your room was not occasioned by the probability that you would be suspected of the murder of John Dashwood, for if arrested for that crime you could have produced the body of the living man, and so confounded the officers. What were your reasons, then, for acting as you have done? I will tell you. You were afraid of something that now causes the blood to leave your cheeks, your lips to tremble and your guilty heart to beat like a trip hammer. You were afraid to remain longer in St. Louis lest the river should speak, should give up its dead and brand you liar and murderer. Know now that the river has spoken—it spoke this morning before I came here. Know that the body of your victim has been found. Gabriel Leonard, I arrest you for the murder of Lucia Massona, alias Cora Reesey, alias Madame Ree."

CHAPTER IX.

THE MISSING MONEY.

Gabriel Leonard, his guilt proclaimed, uttered a cry of despair, and burying his face in his hands, sobbed like a child.

There was pity in the expression with which Nick Carter regarded the detected murderer. That the case had extenuating features, he was positive.

Leonard finally attained a fair degree of composure. He raised his head and looked at the great detective with what was intended for a smile, but which was a ghastly failure.

"You are a smart one," he said, with a little catch in his throat, "and I suppose, from a moral standpoint, you are to be congratulated upon what you have accomplished. But you would have better kept out of this case, for though I killed that miserable wretch of a woman, she deserved death and I was sorely tempted."

"How did it happen?" asked Nick.

"I might refuse to answer, now that I am under arrest," replied Leonard, "but I shall have but one story to tell if ever I am brought before the court for trial, and I am willing to tell it first to you. The woman struck

John Dashwood as I have previously stated. In fact, everything I told you up to the moment I arrived on the wharf to find her bending over Dashwood's prostrate form, is true. The story I told of the after happenings on that wharf is not true. This is the truth: The woman gave me five thousand dollars and the incriminating documents, and then taunted me with being a fool. She boldly declared that she was not my daughter—my supposed relationship had much to do with my acquiescence in her suggestions—and that she had played a fine trick on me. She said I was the easiest mark she had ever played with. She advised me to jump in the river and give the fishes a chance. We stood face to face. I had in my hand at the time the section of iron pipe with which she had cracked the skull of John Dashwood. I had picked it up for the purpose of throwing it into the river. Angered beyond endurance at her words and her expression, I struck her down. The blow killed her. When I realized what I had done I threw the dead body into the river. I should have secured the fifteen thousand dollars in notes which she had thrust into her bosom, but I did not do so. I never thought of the money. My only thought was to remove the evidence of my crime. Then, when the waters of the Mississippi had closed over the body, I returned to John Dashwood. My movements from that time on are known to you. Yes, I am a murderer, my daughter is disgraced and I shall be hanged."

His forced composure vanished now, giving way to his feelings, he shook like a reed. Suddenly his form stiffened, he gave a gasping cry and fell backward on the bed.

"Run for the doctor," said Nick, quickly, to Chick. "I will do what I can while you are gone."

Nick loosened Leonard's collar, and then procured a basin of water and bathed the stricken man's face. He was thus engaged when Dr. Holcomb arrived.

One look at Leonard and he shook his head.

"Too late," was his comment. "He has been a sufferer from heart disease for years. I have repeatedly warned him to avoid excitement. To-day's occurrences have brought on a fatal attack."

The doctor's words proved true. Leonard never recovered consciousness and in half an hour he was dead.

For the purpose of carrying out a plan having for its object the happiness of Leonard's daughter, the wife of John Dashwood, Nick Carter took Dr. Holcomb into his confidence. To the proprietor of the sanitarium he told the whole story of the dead manufacturer's crime, and the circumstances connected therewith.

"Now, doctor," said the detective, "you have been Leonard's friend, and you will agree with me, I know, that no good can result from a publication in the newspapers of the fact that he committed murder. The woman is dead. Leonard is dead. Society has received its meed of protection. The living must be considered. It would break Letty Dashwood's heart if she were to learn what you and I know. Dashwood, himself, must be kept in ignorance of his father-in-law's crime. Let John and his good wife live on in the belief that Leonard was what the moneyed world will believe him to have been, a man unfortunate in business, but not dishonest, not a criminal."

"You are right, Mr. Carter," said Dr. Holcomb. "The truth must be suppressed as a matter of charity. You may depend on me. But—can you stop the gossip that may come from an investigation of the woman's death?"

"I hope to be able to do so. The body was found a few miles below the city in a state that will likely prevent discovery of identity. The face was denuded of its flesh, and nearly all the clothing had been torn from the body. I was at the morgue when the body was brought in—I had been expecting that the find would be made—and but for certain distinguishing marks which I was careful to notice when I met the woman in San Francisco, I should not have known whose body it was. She was almost a stranger in St. Louis and I do not think there will be any identification."

As he spoke Nick thought of Carroll Slack, but not with uneasiness, for on his way to the morgue that morning he had met Slack, who, with suit case in hand, was hurrying to the railway depot to take the train for San Francisco.

As for the chief of police, there was no fear that he would attempt to spoil the program. He might suspect the truth, but without evidence, without witnesses, he could do nothing.

Events turned out as Nick wished. The body of the woman found in the river was not identified, and the coroner's jury returned a verdict of death at the hands of some person or persons unknown.

There was a happy meeting at Dr. Holcomb's sanitarium the day following the death of Gabriel Leonard. But the delight on the part of Mrs. Dashwood was soon mingled with sorrow, for though she had found her husband, just saved from the jaws of death, she had lost her father, whose tender solicitude for her welfare had been one of the joys of her life.

To Nick Carter John Dashwood explained his presence on the wharf that fatal night.

"Filbon's absence from home," he said, "alarmed me. Of course there was the possibility that he had fled the city, fearing that Mr. Leonard, upon discovering the robbery, would have him arrested and punished. But there was also the possibility that Filbon, weak-natured as he was, had committed suicide. After a talk with his mother, in which I made light of my call, saying it was on a matter of business requiring attention early next morning, and of which I had forgotten to speak when I parted with Filbon, I went to the wharf, fearing that he had thrown himself into the river, yet hoping I should find him somewhere in the vicinity, his rash design not yet accomplished. I did not find him, but I met Madame Ree."

A few days after this conversation Nick and Chick left St. Louis for New York.

In his comfortable den the great detective went over the case for the benefit of Patsy and Ten-Ichi. They were intensely interested in the recital of events, dating from the night of the disappearance of John Dashwood.

"When did you spot the truth?" asked Patsy.

"When I found Cora Reesey's brooch on the wharf, I began to have a dim idea of what had happened. But I did not unbosom myself to the chief of police, for the reason that I hadn't a particle of evidence to support the theory that the woman had been murdered and not the man. Thereafter, however, I worked with that theory in mind. It seemed plausible. In fact, it was the only theory which could explain many circumstances. The disappearance of Filbon's boat was evidence, to my mind, that a living body had been taken away and not a dead one. There would be no need to row away with a dead body, the deep, slowly moving Mississippi could take care of that. Then, as I thought of the possibility of somebody—Leonard, probably—taking away a wounded man in a boat, my mind reverted to the assurance Leonard had given his daughter that Dashwood would soon turn up all right. If he had killed Dashwood, or knew that Dashwood had been killed by somebody else, he would not have acted as he did.

"The finding of the rusty iron pipe settled the matter for me. Upon that pipe, adhering to the partly detached flakes or wafers of rust, were human hairs of the color and fineness of the hairs on the head of John Dashwood. But they were also of the color and fineness of the hairs on the head of Cora Reesey. I might have been confused over the hairs had I not noticed one very long one, much longer than any that was ever upon the head of Dashwood. It was a woman's hair, and it was stuck to the rust with coagulated blood.

"Now, convinced that Leonard had killed the woman, and had carried away Dashwood, who had been wounded by the woman—and I readily conjectured in what manner and under what circumstances the wound had been received—I instituted the search for Leonard, which resulted in the discovery at the sanitarium. I might not have succeeded but for Chick's assistance. Chick is a good one. He never missed a trick."

Chick, who had been in a brown study, looked up [illegible] question in his eyes.

"Nick," said he, "we cleaned pretty well in St. Louis, but we left a mystery behind all the same."

"It is a matter of money, isn't it?" queried Nick, with a look of understanding.

"Sure. Gabe Leonard saw Cora Reesey put fifteen thousand dollars in bank notes in her bosom that night on the wharf. Now, when her dead body reached the morgue the money was gone. The coroner, having no idea of the identity of the corpse, and knowing nothing of any relations of a business nature or otherwise between a certain Madame Ree, a palmist, and Gabriel Leonard, manufacturer, did not look for missing money when he searched what was left of the woman's clothing. [illegible] found nothing of value. Even the rings on her fingers were gone."

"Yes, I know that."

"Well, what do you think? Did the fishes and the crabs eat the rings and the notes, or——"

"Or was the body robbed before it reached the morgue? It was robbed beyond the shadow of a doubt."

"Then the Leonard-Dashwood-Reesey case cannot be considered closed until the mystery of that robbery shall have been solved. I have an idea that some day you will bump up against the robber."

Nick laughed. "All sorts of things happen in this curious world," he said.

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 437, will contain "Following a Blind Trail; or, The Detective's Best Guess."

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